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SISTER ALPHONSA

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K. C. CHACKO

Two years have elapsed since the subject of this short biography rendered her soul to God at the age of 36 years in an obscure Convent in Travancore. Within this short period her reputation for holiness has spread throughout India and beyond and is bringing many thousands of pilgrims to her grave in Bharananganam. Many remarkable cures have been attributed to her intercession. This short life by Mr. K. C. Chacko will be read with interest . . . . It is written in a correct and restrained style with a real understanding of spiritual values, and is commendably free from the pious exaggerations which a certain type of "Life of Saint" has made all too familiar to us. Miraculous and preternatural elements are not wanting in the life of this humble nun and her posthumous reputation is full of it. But Mr. Chacko has handled it in a critical spirit and kept it in due subordination to the essential elements—her life of unwavering faith, ardent piety, and heroic resignation to the trials which were crowded into her brief life. Her love of suffering had its root in a deep love for Christ crucified, and the entire record brings out admirably the role of suffering in the Christian life.

Fr. Martindale, S.J., the well-known English writer on spiritual subjects contributes a luminous little "appreciation" of the life which enhances the value of the booklet.

The Mail, Madras.

★

The remarkable life of a young Catholic nun . . . . It is the story of Sister Alphonsa who dedicated herself to the Church and to the true Christian ideal of service and sacrifice with saintly zeal and rectitude. Her grave at Bharananganam has become a place of pilgrimage today, where many seek solace and cure for ailments. The present book deals with her spiritual evolution with rare insight.

The Hindu, Madras.

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SISTER ALPHONSA

SISTER ALPHONSA

BY

K. C. CHACKO, M.A., B.E., A.M.I.E. (INDIA).

COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING

TRIVANDRUM.

OFFICE OF THE REGISTRA[illegible]

12 APR 1949

MADRAS

THIRD EDITION

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ALPHONSA PUBLISHERS

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1949

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IMPRIMATUR

† JAMES KALACHERRY,
Bishop of Changanacherry,
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H. L. Rt. Rev. Dr. JAMES KALACHERRY,
Bishop of Changanacherry.

PREFACE

Father Romulus T. O. C. D., the special spiritual director and confessor of Sister Alphonsa, preached the sermon at her funeral service. He said, "With the most profound conviction in my heart, and as one who has known this religious very intimately, I affirm that we are now participating in the last rites of a saintly person. If the world had realised her intrinsic worth, unprecedented crowds including hundreds of priests and bishops from all over India would have assembled here. They would have rushed and clamoured for even a glimpse of this body and for some precious relic or token of this person. I assure you, that as far as human judgment can be relied on, this young nun was not much less saintly than the Little Flower of Lisieux."

These words were prophetic. Unbelievably large crowds, hundreds of priests and numerous bishops have since then visited her tomb and paid their respects. Devout recipients have acknowledged countless favours, including *miraculous cures* through the intercession of Sister Alphonsa.

This account based on the book in Malayalam by Father Romulus, tries to set out briefly the main events in the life of the young nun. Only an authorised enquiry, conducted by proper authorities, can reveal further details of a life that was mostly spent within the strict enclosure of a convent. However, we have here, enough material, to study, admire and appreciate the heroic virtues that sanctified her life. A chronic victim of physical suffering, constrained to live under the rigorous discipline of community life, and dominated by an impulsive desire to practise the severest austerities and mortifications, Sister Alphonsa was purified like precious metals in the smith's furnace. She has held up before a questioning world, her conviction of the ultimate triumph of *resignation to God's will* and her tremendous faith in the *redeeming value of suffering*, physical as well as mental, endured on behalf of Christ. The following pages will bear out the truth.

No artistic or literary perfection is attempted in this book. Great care has been taken to give the exact equivalents to the words in the letters and statements of Sister Alphonsa.

It is difficult to acknowledge fully all the help I have received. The spiritual directors, superiors, colleagues, friends and relations of Sister Alphonsa have given me much valuable information. Friends in England have corrected and in many places almost rewritten the manuscript for this book. I have received very great encouragement, direction and help at the hands of numerous priests and bishops from here and abroad. To them all I am immensely grateful.

I wish to record specially my thanks to all the exalted prelates of the Church in India, who have graciously approved and blessed my work (extracts from their letters are given elsewhere in the book) and to Very Rev. Fr. Kuruvilla Plathottam and Rev. Fr. J. Mannanal for the very great help they have given me in collecting authentic material for the successive editions of the book.

I am also thankful to Messrs. J. Thaliath & Sons for publishing the first two editions of this book.

May Sister Alphonsa intercede for all those who have disinterestedly collaborated with me in this work. They have all given gener-

ously of their time and resources, without even caring for the satisfaction of being acknowledged.

Trivandrum
8-12-48.

Author.

DECLARATION

If, in publishing this work with the permission of Ecclesiastical Superiors, I have made some references to the supernatural element in the life of Sister Alphonsa, I declare, in conformity with the decrees of Pope Urban VIII, that I am not anticipating the decisions of the Holy Church which is the sole judge in these matters.

Author.

FOREWORD

BY

HIS LORDSHIP

RT. REV. THOMAS POTHACAMURY

BISHOP OF BANGALORE

I had not heard of Sister Alphonsa till May 1947. While on board the ship from Liverpool to Bombay, I read an account of the remarkable cure of the club-foot of a boy, attributed to the intercession of Sister Alphonsa, in the "New Leader," a copy of which I picked up at St. Joseph's College, Mill Hill, London. I was struck by that incident, the more so because the cure was certified by a doctor.

After returning to Bangalore, I heard something about her life and the many favours reported to have been granted to pilgrims to her grave at Bharananganam. My attention was called to the many thanksgivings published in "The Mail" (Madras) thus bearing testimony to the widespread belief in her sanctity and intercessory powers. These thanksgivings are now almost a daily feature in "The Mail." I had an opportunity to visit

her grave on February 27, 1948, and to say Mass in the mortuary chapel in which her remains are interred. The profusion of candles burning all round the grave and the fervour displayed by the faithful who crowded the church were most impressive.

The priests and a few lay persons I met spoke with admiration of her wonderful life and of her sufferings and of the cheerfulness and patience with which she endured them. The Sisters of the Clarist Convent, Bharananganam, where Sister Alphonsa lived and died, told me, from their personal knowledge and experience, of her insight into things spiritual and of her intense supernatural life. They related a few incidents which revealed her fore-knowledge. During the four or five days I was in Travancore, I came across a few Bishops and many priests. They were deeply convinced of her great sanctity and hoped that an inquiry would be instituted into the authenticity of the reported cures at Bharananganam. That struck me as something remarkable, for we know from history and experience how reluctant Bishops and most of the clergy are to believe in supernatural manifestations, unless positive proofs are furnished.

I happened to meet a boy about 12 years old, whose name I do not know, nor did I inquire, for I never expected that I would be asked to write a Foreword to this book. He told me he had a club-foot which was now straightened, thanks to the favour of Sister Alphonsa. Though the foot does not appear quite normal, for there are some scar-like marks on the instep, one could not but be struck by the unexpected recovery of this lad.

The few spiritual notes and some of the letters Sister Alphonsa wrote, translated from Malayalam and published in this book, and the narrative of her life bear testimony to many of her spiritual qualities, her utter unselfishness and her love of suffering. The keynote of her life was death to self and life to Christ and in Christ. "The grains of wheat," she said, "are ground and crushed. Then the white flour is obtained. This is baked and transformed into hosts for the Holy Eucharist. Even so we must be ground and crushed and transformed by suffering like the hosts." How faithfully does she not echo the teaching of the Master, Who said, "Amen I say to you unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die it bringeth forth

much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life in this world keepeth it unto life eternal. (St. John XII/24, 25). As in the natural order, so also in the supernatural order, death is the necessary prelude to life. There is no bread unless the wheat is ground to powder and no wine unless the grapes are crushed. Without self-renunciation and detachment from earthly things, there is no spiritual life. Christ was the centre of Sister Alphonsa's life and character and not self. She dethroned herself to enthrone Christ, and made Him, with unerring vision, the focus of her life.

Mr. K. C. Chacko has given many examples of Sister Alphonsa's love for suffering, mental and physical. She did not chafe under them, but accepted them in a spirit of cheerfulness and asked for more. She carried on her ordinary daily duties in an extraordinary manner. There lies the secret of her holy life. Hers was the "Little Way" of St. Therese of Lisieux and the "humble submission" of St. John Berchmans. In recent times, there has been a succession of saintly persons whose holiness lay in simplicity and self-effacement and whose lives are a beaconlight to the modern generation. It is by suffering that

their love of God was purified and intensified. Their sanctity reached so high a degree that God honoured it with wonderful powers. Sister Alphonsa seems to be one such.

Hundreds of thousands of Catholics in Malabar and other parts of South India have faith in Sister Alphonsa and invoke her aid, for they are convinced that she is a person of uncommon holiness. Whether the reported cures are supernatural or not, must be left to the judgment of Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church. What a power would she not wield over the minds and hearts of the Catholics of our country were her cause to be taken up. At a turning point in its history, when the Church has to face so many difficulties and trials, struggles and dangers, different in character and different in scope from those which assailed her in the past, may we not hope that through her intercession the Church will overcome all obstacles and grow in strength and vigour? It is fitting that such a beautiful soul should have sprung up in the earliest and most prosperous home of Christianity in our country.

No Indian has yet been raised to the honours of the altar. Her fame for sanctity

has taken hold of the public mind. It may be that Divine Providence has chosen her to show us that the richness and fulness of ascetic life is within the reach of all. We pray and hope fervently that her cause may be taken up. Whether that hope is realised at an early date or not, this book will edify its readers, stimulate their piety and prove a fresh source of courage to those who strive to seek God and serve Him earnestly.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

BY

T. N. SIQUEIRA, S. J.

Two years are over since Sister Alphonsa died; her Life has been written and eagerly read in Malayalam, Tamil, and English; the number of those who visit her grave at Bharananganam and of those who thank her publicly for her intercession with God is rising. But is her message to India and the world of to-day understood?

After visiting the chapel where her body is buried and reading her Life by Mr. Chacko I have no doubt that God has sent this unknown, unimportant nun of a small convent in a small village of Travancore in this mid-twentieth century to teach us an important lesson. Just as Sister Therese of the Child Jesus was raised in France at a time when science and criticism were giving men a swelled head to teach them that unless they become as little children they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, so, I think, Sister Alphonsa was meant by our good 'pedagogue', God, to teach us in this pleasure-intoxicated age that unless

the grain of wheat fall to the ground and die, it cannot bear any fruit, that he that doth not carry his cross and follow Our crucified Master is not worthy of Him.

This lesson is most timely; for modern life has become too comfortable for a 'valley of tears' and a place of exile and trial. Surgery has become almost painless; diseases can be mostly prevented and if they do come, easily and even pleasantly cured; electricity has neutralized the changes of weather and season; food and clothing and lodging have become as convenient and pleasant as they can be. And even in India, where our standard of living is still low, the upper and middle classes have made their lives much more comfortable than ever before. What, then, becomes of the law of suffering which is inexorable both in the natural and supernatural plane?

Even in a sinless world there would be a certain suffering due to the inevitable changes in finite and imperfect existence. But in the actual state of a sinful and sin-full world suffering is as necesary as life itself. Every sin, mortal or venial, is an excess of enjoyment beyond what is allowed by nature and reason; for every sin, therefore, there awaits the sinner

a corresponding and proportionate suffering either in this life or in the next. Just as God has established in the physical world a beautiful harmony with each thing in its own place and orbit—which inspired Wordsworth to write one of his best lines to Duty,

'Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong'—so also in the moral sphere He has produced a wonderful harmony through the interlinking of rights and duties. When this harmony is disturbed by sin, it has to be restored by suffering: excessive 'turning towards creatures' (which is a synonym for illicit enjoyment) has to be made up for by extra 'aversion from creatures' (i.e. pain).

Only the saints understand this law and ask for suffering; the rest have to be reminded of it and all but forced into it for their own good. Even two World Wars with all their train of death and separation and distress and disease and starvation, even floods and droughts and earthquakes, even discord and disunion are not enough to bring modern man to his senses. For, curiously but undoubtedly, the sight of suffering around us makes us more pleasure-loving by the law of compensation; the stress and excitement of war makes us by

reaction more easygoing and soft. We become callous, like gravediggers at funerals. Our good God therefore sends us a holy nun like Sister Alphonsa to show us that suffering is not only useful but necesary—even in India, where the climate and poverty enervate not only the body but also the soul and incline both to inertia and ease.

Sister Alphonsa teaches us by her example that we must suffer not only for our own sins but also for the sins of others; for we are all members of the same Body of Christ, brothers of Christ and therefore brothers among ourselves. And as Christ suffered for us, we too must suffer for one another and thus make up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ (according to St. Paul's strong expression), i.e. continue the programme of suffering started by Our Lord and left to be finished by His Church militant, as long as it is unfinished imperfect, non-triumphant, and thus obtain the application of His infinite merits to each individual who is in need of them. Since Our Lord can suffer no more, we have to suffer.

May the life of Sister Alphonsa written with such ardour and insight by a layman of her own community, teach us to accept suffer-

ing when it comes and to ask for more suffering of the body (in which most men sin), suffering of the mind (where pride has its throne), suffering of the soul (where vanity hides itself beyond detection)! Her short life was one uninterrupted pain of body, mind and soul—disease, misunderstanding (even by her own companions), thoughtless and unkind criticism even by those who should have defended her. We can honour her in no sincerer way than by living and dying like her.

AN APPRECIATION

BY

FR. C. C. MARTINDALE, S. J.

In what follows, we hope that no word will be taken as anticipating the Church's verdict, if it be asked for and given, upon Sister Alphonsa's holiness. Should it have been "heroic," God will certainly make it known, should He wish to.

But we may certainly pray that her story may become known especially in her own land —a soil surely so well prepared for a rich harvest of sanctity, of asceticism, and of the contemplative and mystical life.

We must however insist that the history of Sister Alphonsa will remain unintelligible unless we take into account the whole Catholic doctrine of the person and work of Our Lord. That this girl appreciated to the full the supreme importance of *prayer* should surprise no Christian; but there may be those who are disconcerted by her intense wish to *suffer*. We must insist that there was nothing morbid in this, and that no Catholic attaches any value

to suffering *as such,* but only, as we said within the full doctrine of our Lord's redemptive work. Had the Son of God taken up our human nature in a *sinless world,* He would not have suffered as He did. But the whole world is dislocated by Sin; sin, as we very well see, is at the back not only of individual injustices, but of national and international crimes. Our Lord, then, coming into such a world, could not but suffer and, unless He worked miracles on His own behalf, (which He never did) was certain to be slain. Knowing this, He entered our world and did not regard His work as consummated till He should have made Himself 'obedient unto death—yes, a death upon a cross!' (phil, ii-8.)

But he did not .thus live and die and rise again merely *instead of* us: He did so *for* us, and we are so to be united with. Him—to be actually 'in Him, as St. Paul keeps saying—that we co-operate with all His saving work. By ourselves, we can do nothing; certainly we can do nothing whatsoever to rescue ourselves from the penalties of sin. But, as St. Paul again keeps saying, we Christians are Christ's Body, His mystical Body of which we must affirm that it continues to grow till all things

shall have been consummated into the perfect Christ—one living 'Christ,' He the head; we, the limbs—the living 'cells,' as in more modern language we might say.

Therefore His life continues itself in all of us, a life of work and suffering, passing through death to resurrection and glorification—all of it *in Him*. But that has not fully come to pass yet. Therefore more remains to be done actually by ourselves, though always through, with and *in Him*. Therefore St. Paul can use the amazing words (Col. i 24) "as it is, I rejoice in my sufferings (endured) for your sakes; yes, I fill up what is still lacking in the anguish of Christ—in *my flesh*, for the sake of *His Body*, that is, the Church." When our Lord left this visible world, much remained to be done: and much was done by St. Paul himself, yet even so, not *all*. Throughout the centuries more has been done, until our own days are reached, and then it is our turn. But alas, few Christians realise this, and few are called to carry it through to the uttermost. There have, however, always been souls generous to the point of heroism who have felt that they would wish to be as like Christ as possible also in the matter of suffering and even, should He so

permit it, of death. Such has been the self-dedication of nearly all the greatest mystics of whom we know. They have not been in love with suffering, but with Christ: not, if I may so put it, with the Cross, but with the Crucified, and have rejoiced to suffer on behalf of "*His* Body, which is the Church." It may be that Sister Alphonsa had this rare and sublime vocation: if indeed she had, we are right at least in praying that God may make it known to us, and also, make us understand how in the midst of that pain, she preserved the innermost 'love, joy, peace' which are the first of the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Extracts from some letters to the Author:—

His Excellency the Arch-Bishop of Goa and Damaun, Patriarch of the East Indies desires me to acknowledge the life of Sister Alphonsa, a brochure which His Excellency found very interesting and deserving to be known by the public.

Chancellor of Goa.

I have just finished reading the book. I may go over it again as a spiritual reading as I have found it very interesting and encouraging and consoling....It seems to me that the chief lesson to learn from your book is to suffer patiently for Jesus. I am sure that many more souls will benefit by reading your life of "Sister Alphonsa" so simply and yet so beautifully written.

The Most Rev. Evangelist. O. F. M. Cap.,

Archbishop of Agra.

I hope the books will realise your pious ambition.

The Most Rev. Thomas, D. Roberts, S. J., D. D.,

Archbishop of Bombay.

I wish the book all the success you wish it yourself, and above all edification and then imitation of Sister Alphonsa, which would certainly be the greatest compliment to her......

The Most Rev. Ferdinand Perier, S. J., D. D.,

Archbishop of Calcutta.

I have read it through with avidity; it is a revelation to me; and will be to any reader who has not been in touch with her life. It is refreshing to know that in this materialistic age there are souls who live in perpetual communion with God and who are heroic enough to accept severe suffering, view the meaning of them through

the eyes of Christ and utilise them to get nearer and nearer to our Saviour. Let us hope that God may in His Divine Wisdom, make her known to the world and raise her to the honours of the altar to serve as an example of Christian and Religious perfection.

The Most Rev. Dr. S. P. Mulligan,
O. F. M. Cap., Archbishop of Delhi—Simla.

Most opportune book calculated to popularise the life of the Revered Sister Alphonsa outside Malabar.

The Most Rev. Dr. Augustine Kandathil,
Archbishop of Eranakulam.

To be united with God and to accomplish His will is sanctity; to accept gladly suffering of all kind is the most sure way to follow the will of God. Sister Alphonsa was therefore blessed with the best road to sanctity.

The Most Rev. Augustin Simeon Colas, D. D.,
Archbishop of Pondicherry.

I have not read a better life of the Rev. Sister than the one written by you.

The Most Rev. Joseph Attippetty,
Archbishop of Verapoly.

God grant that through the intercession of the Saintly Soul, our country may come to know and appreciate the message of Christ.

Rt. Rev. L. Raymond, Bishop of Allahabad.

This book will edify its readers, stimulate their piety and prove a fresh source of courage to those who strive to seek God and serve Him earnestly.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Pothacamury,
Bishop of Bangalore.

I had the pleasure of meeting the saintly nun at Bharananganam. I did not see her long, it is true. But she did not impress me as particularly holy; an ordinarily sickly nun; nothing more. The saints are all like that; men and women very much like us outwardly; their soul alone is different, and one takes more than five minutes to discover a saint. We pray her. May She help the Diocese of Vizag and the poor Bishop whom she met in 1945.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Joseph Baud, M. S. F. S.

Bishop of Vizagapatam.

Sister Alphonsa is already well known in Ceylon. The books will help very much to make the saintly sister better known and loved.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Ignatius Glennie, S. J.,

Bishop of Batticaloa, Ceylon.

It is very edifying and I like to think that the convents of her order hide many an Alphonsa in their enclosures. If it pleases God to have her raised to the honours of the Altar, she will shine as a beautiful star in the Indian firmament. Meanwhile her influence for good is felt all over the country and this is an unmistakable sign of holiness. From her glorious seat in heaven, may she look down kindly on me and my flock.

Rt. Rev. D. Grassi, Bishop of Bezwada.

You deserve to be congratulated for a readable and clear account of this holy religious, who is now beginning to be known in Ceylon as well. Works such as yours are especially welcome because they bring before us the marvellous manifestations of Divine Providence towards the sons and daughters of India.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Edmund Peiris, O. M. I.,

Bishop of Chilaw.

I find your book very interesting.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Jos Alvernez, Bishop of Cochin.

Her life should be edifying and doing good to all her clients.

Rt. Rev. Mgr. B. Oubagaraswami,
Bishop of Coimbatore.

I have no doubt that much good will come from the perusal of the life of this holy nun. We will do what we can to spread the book throughout the laity. With best wishes and sincere congratulations for the fine work you have done ......

Rt. Rev. L. L. Graner, C. S. C., LL. D. D. D.,
Bishop of Dacca.

I know enough of the sister's life to say that these books will do a lot of good in these sad times when people are all bent on material gains and things.

Rt. Rev. Dr. D. Bernard Regno, O. S. B.,
Bishop of Kandy.

You have supplied a long felt need and that very creditably. I finished reading my copy at one stretch.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Tharayil, Co-adjutor Bishop, Kottayam.

I am sure that many will be edified and profited by reading this saintly life. .... Our Divine Master has chosen Sister Alphonsa to join the ranks of victim souls, who offer themselves completely as victims of Divine Love. Sister Alphonsa was convinced that the ultimate triumph in spiritual warfare must come from complete resignation of her will to the divine pleasure. She exemplified in her life that souls must be crucified in the crucible. .... May the saintly life of Sister Alphonsa inspire many to walk in her footsteps.

Rt. Rev. Mgr. Peter Francis, D. D.
Bishop of Kumbhakonam.

I am sure it will interest and edify us all.

Rt. Rev. Michael Oscomendy, D. D.,
Bishop of Malacca.

The book is certainly inspiring as it sets forth the inner life of a very holy nun aglow with an intense love of Jesus Crucified and eager to follow the advice of St. Paul: I am crucified with Christ, I make up what is wanting of the sufferings and sacred passion of the Saviour. Her long drawn out martyrdom certainly fitted her for the sublime vocation of Victim and while serving to purify and perfect her own soul, it cannot but have served also the interests of the Heart of Jesus and proved beneficial to many souls.

Rt. Rev. J. P. Leonard, S. J., D. D.,
Bishop of Madura.

The life of Sister Alphonsa is a highly edifying one, finely written and will highly appeal to the people.

Rt. Rev. Victor Rosario Fernandez, D. D.,
Bishop of Mangalore.

Through the Catholic Magazines the fame of the saintly Sister Alphonsa has reached even this far away corner of India. The book will be distributed in our institutions and sisters and children will profit at the contact with this fruit of Sanctity India has produced.

Rt. Rev. Mgr. Francis Benedict Ciabo, O. P., D. D.,
Bishop of Multan.

I thank you very much for the beautiful sketch of the life of Sister Alphonsa. Your book is sure to have a large circulation all for the glory of God and in honour of the saintly soul who is invoked all over the world.

Rt. Rev. Rene Fenga, D. D.,
Bishop of Mysore.

I deeply appreciate the most edifying life of Sister Alphonsa specially her spirit of renunciation of worldly things and love of suffering for her Divine Spouse.

Rt. Rev. Aloysius Francis Gayet, N. S. F. S., D. D.,
Bishop of Nagpur.

Presenting the life of so noble a soul to the world, must surely draw some sinners to repentance, tepid souls to fervour, and generous souls to greater perfection and nearer to God. Time will unfold the plans of divine Providence and the part that Sister Alphonsa occupies in the plans. Thousands may be drawn to the living faith through her suffering and example; admiration may lead to true knowledge.

Rev. Hoogland, Secretary to the Bishop of Nellore.

This neat sketch of Sister Alphonsa's life would be appreciated and profited by thousands and bring them closer to the ideals she sacrificed her life for.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Jerome Fernandez, Bishop of Quilon.

Let us hope that some day more official recognition of her merits may crown her saintly life and death. We need saints in India and of India.

Rt. Rev. Oscar Sevrin, S. J., D. D., Bishop of Ranchi.

I am reading the life with pleasure, spiritual joy and edification.

Rt. Rev. Dionysius Vismara, D. D.,
Bishop of Secundarabad.

You have done a good work in writing this book, many people will benefit by it.

Rt. Rev. Jacob Mendonca, Bishop of Trichinopoly.

Your work is a real success and worthy of being placed before the English reading public both for its language as well as for its contents.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Alappat, Bishop of Trichur.

There is a good deal of resemblance between the virgin of Lisieux and the virgin of Bharananganam: both followed the little way—both suffered much—both died unknown to the outer world—both began to shower roses from heaven—both have clients all over the world .... I am writing to the Rev. Mother Agnes of Jesus, the Prioress of Lisieux .... regarding Sister Alphonsa, the Little Flower of Malabar.

Rt. Rev. Dr. G. F. T. Roche, S. J., D. D.,
Bishop of Tuticorin.

Let us hope that many generous souls, after reading your book will be anxious to imitate your heroine and to make reparation by sacrifice and suffering. We thank you for making known to us our humble and lovable sister in our seraphic Father St. Francis.

Very Rev. Fr. Anatole, Chancellor of Ajmer.

The book is very interesting and is constantly going from hand to hand: May it help to have Sister Alphonsa placed one day on the Altar, if it be God's will.

Rt. Rev. Mgr. Joachim Villalonga,
Ecclesiastical Superior, Ahemedabad.

I have read your book with great interest and hope it will reach every corner of India; it is fine.

Superior Catholic Mission Cuttack.

It seems a life of a real prodigious nun.

Very Rev. J. B. Anselmo, D. D., Administrator,
Dinajpur.

I was greatly edified myself to read the account of the so simple yet so beautiful life of that little sister, which often reminds one of St. Therese. May Sister Alphonsa become the Little Flower of India for the greater glory of God in this country.

Rt. Rev. Mgr. Jerome Malefalent,
C. F. M. Cap., Gorakhpur.

I found it very edifying and enlightening. There seems to be all the signs of a genuine and great saint .... I pray that God through the intercession of Sister Alphonsa may pour out abundant graces for the conversion of her countrymen.

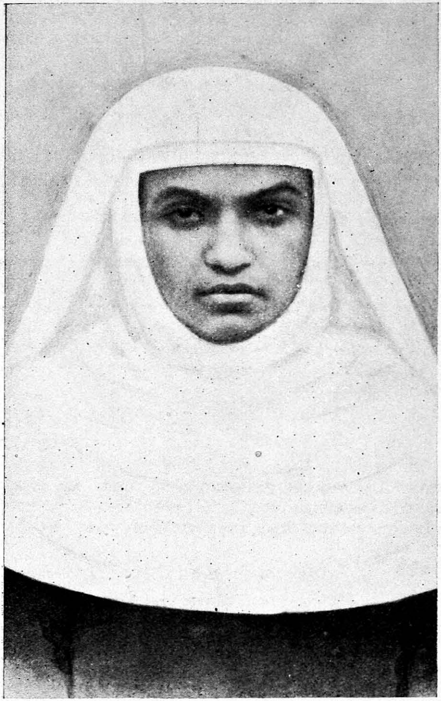
Very Rev. Francis Simeons, S. V. D., Indore.

I take this unique opportunity to congratulate you on the splendid work you have done and may the good Sister Alphonsa lavish an incessant source of heavenly grace and favours from high on you and your near and dear ones.

Rt. Rev. Mgr. Francis Xavier French, O. F. M., Cap.
Jhansi.

Sister Alphonsa is getting known here too gradually; particularly Catholics who have come from Southern India or have connections with the South show a great confidence in her.

Rt. Rev. Mgr. C. D. O. Praem,
Prefect Apostolic of Jubbulpore.



SISTER ALPHONSA
(as a novice)

CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS

The world will never know how many souls have reached great heights of holiness and perfection by pursuing the "little way" of Saint Therese of Lisieux; for, it is only occasionally that God allows the excellence and grandeur of lives of such pious simplicity to become known, to serve as an example and inspiration to all mankind. The life of Sister Alphonsa, a Poor Clare nun of Bharananganam, seems to reveal this purpose.

Bharananganam is situated in the diocese of Changanacherry in Travancore. Few people realise that in Travancore there flourishes a Christian community dating back to Apostolic times. Bharananganam is a small town about 120 miles north of Trivandrum, the capital of the State. It is distinguished by a beautiful Catholic church with adjoining schools and religious houses. Prominent among these is the Convent of the Poor Clares. Here Almighty God was pleased to raise up the soul of Sister Alphonsa to the fulness of love and union with Himself. She died in July 1946, but her influ-

ence and inspiration live on, and Bharananganam has become a centre of pilgrimage, reasserting the challenge of the Faith to the growing forces of materialism. The crowds that now gather daily round her grave and the ceaseless murmur of grateful prayers rising to the throne of God, speak of the conviction of the faithful that here was a highly favoured soul and devoted child of God. There is no doubt that these people experience that same elation of spirit which inspired St. Paul with the words:

"O death, where is thy victory?"
"O death, where is thy sting?"

Sister Alphonsa was born in the village of Kudamaloor (in the diocese of Changanacherry) which had all the traditions of a one-time political capital. The royal family, that ruled over the protectorate of Kudamaloor impressed by the loyalty of the Christians, invited them to settle there and built for them a church. As a result of the royal munificence there sprang up, as early as the third century A. D., a whole community of Christians, strong in their faith and renowned for their culture. Among them was the Muttathupadathu family to which Sister Alphonsa belonged. Father

Joseph Muttathupadathu, Father Philip Andumalil and the late Carmelite Fathers Boniface and Emmanuel were her close relatives.

The key-note of Sister Alphonsa's life was a yearning for suffering, and a simplicity modelled closely on that of St. Therese, and it is perhaps significant that one who in later years asked of Our Lord for more and more suffering, and who was unwilling, at any time, to pray to her Divine Spouse for relief from it, was herself, in an especial manner, cradled in suffering.

Her parents, Joseph and Mary, were expecting their fourth child, when Mary's sister came to visit them. It was a hot summer's night, so the sisters spread a mat in the open courtyard, and, lying down, talked themselves to sleep. Very soon Mary awoke and cried out, horrified to find a huge snake about her neck. In her terror, she snatched the reptile and flung it from her. She escaped being bitten, but the shock led to the child being born prematurely. Soon afterwards she herself died. The child, who in later cloistered life took the name of Alphonsa, was christened Anna. Her aunt Annamma, to whom her dying mother confided her, affectionately called

her Annakutty. She addressed her aunt as 'mother', and accorded her all the devotion of a daughter.

It was when she was about four years old that she first experienced physical suffering through a serious attack of eczema, which almost proved fatal; but she was spared for the still greater sufferings which lay ahead.

Annakutty commenced her education in the Catholic primary school at Arpookara, Kudamaloor, but later her aunt transferred her to the government school at Muttuchira, where she herself could watch over her more closely. Annakutty went to Confession and Holy Communion regularly every Saturday, on the Fridays in Lent and on feast days. Some of her companions can still testify to the happiness which she seemed to experience on those occasions.

Her aunt exercised complete control over all the child's activities, not only in the home, but also in church and at school, and the care which she bestowed on the motherless charge was not unmixed with a stern discipline.

Sister Alphonsa has in later years described how the rigorous discipline of her aunt

had left its mark. "Even for the slightest shortcomings my mother used to chide me severely. I was not allowed even to justify myself. Having cultivated such dumb endurance it has become impossible for me now to reply even in jest. My mother never let me enjoy any freedom whatever. I had to talk always in very low tones. Many times have I paced to and fro in the kitchen. And there my knowledge of the world ended. I was not allowed—but for one or two exceptions—to talk to anybody in school, or to look around me on my way there. Nor did I talk to anybody. The children nicknamed me the dumb girl. I hardly knew anything. Mother got angry with me frequently, and it grieved me much. I used to tremble with fear. May be, it was because I had lost my own mother that I was so much afraid. If I tried to excuse or justify myself when my mother scolded me, that was considered criminal on my part. If I held my peace, she would accuse me of stubbornness—'See, she hasn't a word to say to all this' she would say. If I tried to speak, she would burst out: 'And you, have you the cheek to answer me back?' When the storm had passed and she was free from her household duties, she would sweep the tiled floor, and lie down

on it. She would invite me to her side and embrace me, and cover me with kisses; innumerable kisses she would bestow on me, and that would console me. When next she had to attend to something or other, off she would go, and then start all over again. I would grow timid once more. She would murmur: 'Lazy girl, what a pity, after all the attention and training I have given, she hasn't picked up any of my qualities.' She was equally particular in the matter of food. Even as a child I was not allowed to eat between meals like other children, and at any time, I was only allowed a certain amount. I did not get as much fruit as I would have liked, as mother considered oils, fruits and such things harmful to children. She taught me to be very careful and disciplined. All the same, she loved me intensely.

She dressed me up beautifully when taking me to church. Silver laces and silks with floral designs always glittered around me. Everything was of a quality never before seen in our neighbourhood. Any new pattern at church would catch her eye, and, back at home, she would exclaim, 'I saw such and such a pattern of shawl at church. If I could have bought

one like that for my Annakutty.' This was to induce my cousins to buy similar ones for me, when they went to Kottayam or Trivandrum for their studies. And if they did not, she used to scold them vehemently. 'What brothers you are! A fine way you would all look after my girl if I were to die'. She insisted that I should wear costly and fashionable clothes and ornaments at school. And my classmates used to laugh at me, calling me a dressed-up bride. Unknown to my mother, I would change into simple clothes. When I came here (Bharananganam) the sisters told me that I would have to give up my showy dress, if I wished to join the convent. So I bought a plain white shawl. Mother was furious when I took it home."

In spite of her preoccupation with Annakutty's appearance, her aunt would never allow her to wear modern dress as some of her classmates did. She evinced only one ambition for Annakutty—that one day she should be a good and capable woman like herself, a happy and successful wife and mother. For this she considered domestic training so important, that she was liable to disregard even the child's health. It pleased her, however, to find her

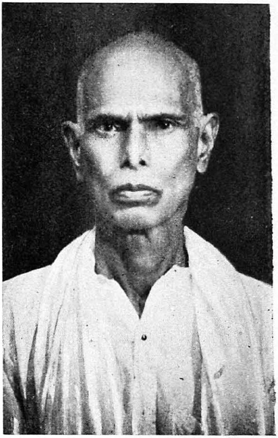
ward so well behaved and needing so little correction.

When others, servants even, were at fault, Annakutty used to plead for them, or would sometimes take the blame herself. Already she was beginning to show something of that great zeal to suffer for others, which was well marked in later years. Of her early days Sister Alphonsa has said: "In my early days I made more progress in my spiritual life than at present. I loved God more ardently. I took great care to avoid all faults. I had nothing special to mention in my First Confession. I zealously aspired to become a saint. I felt that desire while I was reading the biography of Saint Therese of Lisieux. Whenever I visited a Carmelite nun who was a relative of mine, she used to tell me, 'My child, you must become a saint.' Her words redoubled my desires. I prayed much more fervently—unreservedly—then than now. I used to fast, pretending that I was not hungry. As meal times approached I used to feel sorry, for mother never sat down to meals without me, and in her presence I lost the opportunity for sacrifice and fasting. I sometimes played a trick on her in the morning. I would appear to be busy with some

lessons for school when she called me, and would ask her to begin without me. I would keep on pretending until she had nearly finished, and only then join her. I denied myself fish and buttermilk on my fast days. I hurried through my meals leaving those aside, and hastened to give them to the servants. Unknown to anyone, I offered this particular sacrifice to Our Lady."

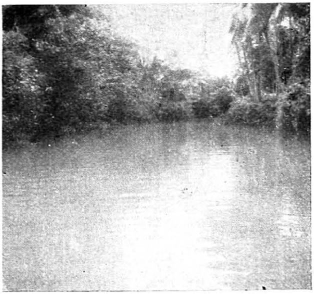
All who knew her realised that it was only her deep humility which led her to say that she had been closer to God in those days. But such accounts as these led the sisters to try and draw out her life-story from her.

Rev. Fr. JOSEPH MUTTATHUPADATHU.



JOSEPH MUTTATHUPADATHU
(Father of Sister Alphonsa).

Muttathupadathu house where Sister Alphonsa was born.



A river scene nearby.

CHAPTER II

PATH TO THE CLOISTER

The history of the Little Flower had filled the heart of Annakutty with a great longing to become a saint, and all her prayers and sacrifices were offered up for this purpose. One day, when she was walking in the compound, she met a Carmelite nun, who spoke to her of the grandeur of religious life and exhorted her to pursue it. Seeing nothing unusual in this at the time, she later recalled that these nuns were not allowed to go about alone, and so she came to believe that she had a vision of the Little Flower whose story she knew almost by heart. It then came home to her that her aspirations after holiness could bear fruit only in the seclusion of convent life. However, she knew that her aunt was eagerly planning her marriage. She shrank from the very thought of going against the wishes of one to whom she owed so much. Her only recourse was prayer. The picture of the Sacred Heart was enthroned in the house, and frequentlv, day and night, she knelt before it

imploring God to move her guardians to consent to her entering a convent. She put herself under the protection of Our Blessed Lady, and fervently avowed to Our Lord that she was prepared to die rather than enter into marriage. Following the example of the saints, she took to fasting and other mortifications, such as kneeling on the gravel to pray with arms outstretched. Teased and laughed at by other children, she cheerfully made of this also a sacrifice of atonement and supplication to God.

But things did not go well for her. The proposals of marriage took definite shape, and names were being mentioned. She now decided that she must speak out, and, summoning up all her strength, she approached her uncle, and pathetically implored him that "in the name of the Five Sacred Wounds of Jesus Christ" he would not compel her to accept marriage. She was so overcome with emotion that she fainted and fell at his feet. Moved with pity, he agreed to let her follow her desire. But the aunt was obdurate; nothing would induce her to surrender her niece to a convent; what was worse, definite assurances were given to one young man.

Annakutty realised that a crisis was reached; by some means she must avert a

betrothal to which she had never consented. She reflected and came to a definite decision. "I must cause some indisposition to my body to stop my going to church for betrothal. I must disfigure myself and destroy my beauty."

How she carried out this grim resolve is best described in her own words. In later life, she confided to one of her sisters in religion. "I have mentioned this only to Father Aloysius. My marriage was fixed up when I was thirteen. What was I to do? In all haste, ornaments were made for me. Mother insisted more and more. I prayed all night, an idea then struck me. If my body was somehow disfigured, then nobody would like me. There was a huge hollow in the ground close to the house—a hollow into which was shovelled all the chaff and grain-husks at the end of harvest time. Fire was applied to it to burn it away. Early in the morning I walked up to the pit, and put one foot into the fire. I slipped and jumped into it. To get out, I had to climb up more than my own height. I was not accustomed to climbing even two feet. I ran to and fro in the fire in my efforts to climb out. The clothes caught fire. My hair, which I had forgotten to tie up, was also burnt at the

ends. I might well have sunk in right up to the neck, and been burnt away; and I do not know how, finally, I climbed out and escaped from the pit. Quickly I opened a box and took out a fresh cloth, and dressed myself completely, covering even the feet, lest others should see the burns on my legs. Mother who was laid up with fever, asked me why I was changing my clothes at that time. I told her that my leg was slightly burnt, and then I fainted. She ran up to me and, seeing my condition, fell down on the verandah and screamed wildly. Neighbours came rushing in. My uncle was not there, he was sent for and brought over. Mother soon regained her composure and consoled herself: 'My child would have been burnt to death in the fire, had not her Guardian Angel protected her.' Teachers and students came from the school to see me. A goldsmith was procured to remove the bangles from my feet. A doctor was summoned to attend on me. Pus had begun to ooze out of both my legs. The doctor came daily, scraped off the pus and renewed the cotton bandages. The toes had been so badly burnt that they were just one mass. The doctor separated them, and dressed each one separately. How much I suffered!

And all of it, I offered up for my one great intention. After 90 days, with the doctor's regular attendance, the wounds were almost healed.

"Mother asked me: 'How did you fall into the fire?' I replied that I slipped and fell into it while attempting to get some charred husk. Mother said that the devil had pushed me into it, for some days previously a possessed woman had declared to her at church. 'You have a daughter in dressing whom up you take much delight. I will get at her!'

"As soon as I had recovered, mother took me to the chapel of the Immaculate Conception at Parel, Changanacherry, to fulfil a vow she had made. Those who saw the scar on my legs shrank from me. It was a painful experience to my mother.

"Though the wounds healed up, I was able to walk only after a long period of treatment. It was feared that my feet and toes would never become normal as they are today." However, the scars remained with her throughout her life. Even her close relations who were very attentive to her during her suffering, were not to learn until after her death that she had gone into the fire almost deliberately. It was in

the novitiate that for the first time, she confided the truth to her spiritual director, Father Aloysius, T. O. C. D. When he found fault with her for inflicting such injuries on herself, she replied with childlike simplicity, "Father I never knew that there was so much fire."

The incident had the desired effect. Her aunt abandoned all idea of marriage, declaring she would not give her child to anybody. In this way God rewarded the heroic sacrifice of the little girl, who had longed to dedicate herself to Him; and, just as God preserved St. Francis of Assisi and St. Thomas Aquinas from temptations against purity, so, all through her life, did He protect and keep Annakutty from all such temptations so that she preserved inviolate to the end her baptismal innocence. And it was because of this sacrifice, surely, that He further rewarded her with the grace to embrace unflinchingly the full weight of the cross, which she had to bear throughout her later life.

Annakutty continued to pray that she might be allowed to enter religious life. The nuns, who knew this, tried to persuade aunt Annamma to give her consent. Gradually she yielded. As soon as she was free to make her

choice, Annakutty expressed a wish to join one of the poor orders rather than the Carmelites close to her home; and, on her asking him, her spiritual director, Father Muricken, suggested the Poor Clares. One of his relations introduced her to some of the sisters from Bharananganam who invited her to their convent. She entered the convent school, on the Feast of Pentecost, as a boarding student, and was placed in the seventh class. Proficient in writing and a good speaker, she soon found herself secretary of the school's literary and debating society; and was moreover an example to the whole school in her single-minded goodness, her obedience and humility. She exercised a similar influence at the Malayalam High School, Vazhapally, attached to the Convent of the Adoration Sisters, where she spent two years for her higher studies. She took the veil of the postulant on 2nd August, 1928, and was named Alphonsa in honour of the saint whose Feast Day it was; and, having now truly entered the religious life, all her enthusiasm and zeal were given over to the love of God.

However, the world was not to be shaken off so easily. She still had some wealthy and persistent suitors, who were encouraged by her

family. The sister in charge of the postulants too, still uncertain of the wisdom of her decision, suggested that she should return home and to family life. Even some priests tried to dissuade her from her purpose.

Once, about this time, on going home for the holidays she found that arrangements for her marriage were actually under way. Not to be deterred by any opposition from her aunt, she declared that she had renounced the world and her family and had dedicated herself to God. With the utmost firmness she told them, "I have already chosen my Love, and to Him have I pledged my word. I would rather die than retract". Such determination overcame all opposition. Her uncle pleaded on her behalf, and her aunt, at last, reluctantly gave way. However she passed away before sister Alphonsa joined the congregation of the Clares finally.

On the 19th May 1930, Annakutty received the habit from the Bishop of Changanacherry at the St. Mary's Church at Bharananganam, on the occasion of his pastoral visit to the parish. This was the long awaited wedding day. She wore the ornaments which the proposed bridegroom's and her own family had

prepared for her marriage. That solemn day of her vestition, Sister Alphonsa enriched with the firm resolution, "I joined the convent to become a saint, and, having survived so many obstacles, what have I to live for if I don't become a saint?"

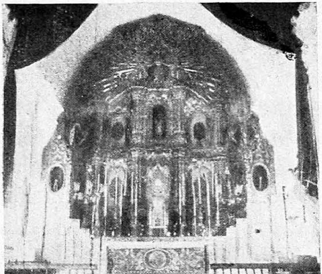
THE ANCIENT CHURCH AT KUDAMALOOR.

Here Sister Alphonsa was baptised.

The baptismal font.

THE MUTTUCHIRA CHURCH

Here Sister Alphonsa first received Holy Communion.



The altar rails where she first communicated.

CHAPTER III

THE NOVICE

The crucifix which is given to novices at their vestition is a reminder that it is a crucified Saviour to whom they are espoused, and by their vows of obedience, poverty and chastity they themselves advance to embrace the Cross. Certainly in the case of Sister Alphonsa, it was through the Cross that God set his seal upon her union with him.

A few months after the vestition, she fell ill and had to be taken to Ernakulam for an operation. Under treatment she improved somewhat for about a year, which she spent as a teacher in the convent school at Vakakad. But the cause of her sickness remained, and in 1933 she had a relapse. She was unable to sleep or to eat, and for three months every movement was an indescribable agony from which there was no relief; but, always cheerful she found consolation in the words of Christ, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me."

Before even the time came to enter the common novitiate at Changanacherry, Sister Alphonsa was already ill, and her superiors realised that only a special grace of God would enable her to join. But her insistent prayers and fervent desire led to such an improvement in her health that she was able to enter the novitiate in August 1935.

The novitiate is the training ground where the superiors assess the qualities of a novice and her ability to fulfil what religious life will demand of her. It is the office of the novice mistress unceasingly to supervise and guide, to encourage and reprove, while the novice's task is to discipline and submit her will to the demands made on her obedience, thereby laying the foundation of all spiritual progress.

Because of her yearning to become a saint Sister Alphonsa was impatient to enter her novitiate without delay. She knew that it was to be the foundation of her spiritual development. That it was a good and stable foundation is shown by her later life; and her urge towards perfection received an added impetus there.

Her novice mistress was Sister Ursula, who had a special personal interest in the postulant,

having been in charge of the convent at Bharananganam when Sister Alphonsa was a student there twelve years earlier.

Father Aloysius, her spiritual director at that time, assisted her first steps in the religious life, and she so revered and respected him that, even in later years, she would write to him for guidance. She never forgot the wise counsel he gave her during the novitiate, and freely drew upon it for the benefit of others also. Sister Alphonsa often spoke gratefully of those who guided her in the novitiate: "These venerable guides laid in me the foundations of wisdom, gave me the food that was to sustain me all through life, judiciously adapting their guidance to my progress."

After one week of the rigorous routine of the novitiate, she broke down in health. She developed a serious haemorrhage, which completely disabled her. A large ulcer appeared on her leg. Her condition seriously interfered with the routine of the other novices, and was so alarming that it was thought advisable to send her back to Bharananganam. The Bishop of Changanacherry was consulted, and, after visiting her, he decided that she should not

be sent back. He preferred her death there, were it to happen, to her being sent back.

For over three months Sister Alphonsa endured great suffering, regretting only that her illness kept her, and those attendant upon her, from community life. Then, at the suggestion of her spiritual director a novena was made by the novices in common, in honour of Father Cyriac Elias of Chavara, the saintly founder of the Syrian Carmelites, who was born in 1805 in the diocese of Changanacherry and died in 1871. The novice mistress has herself described how their prayers were answered:

"I often went into her room at night, as we feared that the worst might happen. One had to look at her very closely to make sure that she was alive. At midnight on the ninth day of the novena, I heard someone talking in the room. I thought it might be a sister who had gone in to attend to her during some sudden convulsion or pain. Annoyed, nevertheless, at hearing voices at a time of strictest silence, I went to the door and looked in. I saw no one, and entered the room to find Sister Alphonsa talking and making gestures, apparently in her sleep. Perplexed, I roused her, reminding her that she was disturbing the

Very Rev. Fr. CYCRIAC ELIAS of Chavara—the Saintly founder of the Syrian Carmelites in Malabar.

Very Rev. Fr. ROMULUS, T.O.C.D.

He was the special spiritual director of Sister Alphonsa for some time. His book in Malayalam on her, forms the basis of this English biography.

silence of the House. She sat up saying, 'Look, Father Elias is here. Can't you see him? Let me ask his blessing.' She seemed to be speaking directly to him. Soon she went on: 'I am cured. Father Elias was here. I saw him. He blessed me; he touched me. He said to me 'You are cured of this illness, and you won't be affected by it again. But you will always have to suffer in other ways'. Perhaps it was just a fancy or a dream, but I am alright now'. Sister Alphonsa spoke the truth. For I saw that the ulcer had healed completely and the haemorrhage had stopped.

There seems no reason to doubt that she actually had a vision, although, in her humility, she was prepared to attribute her experience to imagination and always maintained great reserve in speaking of it. But only a miracle could account for a recovery so sudden and complete—one day a helpless invalid, the next, able to walk up to the chapel and receive Holy Communion. As Father Elias had said, the haemorrhage never troubled her again, but for the rest of her life, she had to endure many other sufferings.

Not only suffering, but every event in her life, served to bring her closer to God, and,

although she had completely surrendered her will, yet she still had to be purified of some imperfections.

The desire to bestow affection was strong in her, and this led her to form a personal attachment to her superiors. She herself has said, "By nature I was given to love others. My heart seems to be full of love. My guides and superiors were the object of my special affection. I wanted to go up to them often and talk with them as a favoured child. I did not know that this irritated others. I did not know that such human and personal affections were not quite fitting. Is it not for those faults of mine that God has given me these present sufferings? In the novitiate I told Father Aloysius of my special dispositions. He advised me to go to my superior but once a week, and then to stay with her for only fifteen minutes. At those weekly visits, as soon as I went up to see her, she used to say, 'Sister you may go' and I could not say anything. Others used to talk freely and at length. But for me only, it was like this. I cannot describe how much it grieved me. But now I am cured of all such folly. I do not desire to see or to have a particular love for anybody. All my love has been directed towards God".

Among the notes she scribbled during her novitiate, we read, "From today, I will give up my special love for......I will not love that person by any love of the natural order......I will not speak or do anything at the prompting of my natural impulses. Every time I fall short of this decision, I shall make some act of reparation. I will specially consider this at the examination of conscience". Elsewhere, she has written of other trials she encountered, and of the way in which she accepted them. "I have suffered much from diseases, and, for the most part, helped by my spiritual director, I have done so patiently, but it is very much more difficult for me to stand accusations from others than any amount of physical suffering. It worried me that I was unable to overlook the most trifling words. I revealed my soul to my spiritual director, whose special interest in me helped me very much. I will try not to retort to anybody. I will apologise whenever I can, or at least endure it all silently. When I am despised and humiliated, I will seek shelter within the Sacred Heart. Let others speak what they like of me: for my part. I will thank God for the favour of allowing me to be reproached by them. I will specially guard my eyes from straying. I will make some atone-

ment, if, carelessly or wilfully, I let my eyes wander. Whatever trouble or trial comes to me I shall not complain. Even if I am accused for no fault of mine, I shall try to admit the fault and apologise".

These resolutions she kept faithfully, and the record she kept of the numerous sacrifices and pious activities of each day, has, fortunately, been preserved. It shows that she had travelled far along the path of spiritual perfection. In addition to the regular spiritual exercises of the religious, the pages of the record are filled with numerous acts of personal sacrifice and acts of charity.

Her novitiate successfully completed, she was allowed by her superiors to take her perpetual vows and this she did through the Immaculate Mother of God. On the 12th August 1936, she solemnly sealed her union with her Divine Spouse in these words: "Lord, do with me as with Thine own". They were no empty words. Her life thereafter was one of unbroken self-dedication to the Will of God.

CHAPTER IV

ATTACKS OF FEVER

From Changanacherry, Sister Alphonsa returned to Bharananganam more zealous than ever for the hardships of the religious life and her notes record a marked increase in her sacrifices and acts of charity. She entered wholeheartedly into community life and found great pleasure in all its activities. She delighted in performing individual acts of kindness to her companions—tidying up after the more careless, and taking extra turns in unpleasant duties. Thoughtless of herself, she freely gave to others whatever of hers she thought would make them happy. She was never resentful when things that were borrowed were not returned. Unknown to anyone, she sought for, and worked at, the most menial tasks. She always wished to be the last or the worst served, and welcomed all opportunities of self-denial. Her evident mastery over herself for God's sake edified everyone.

She knew from her vision in the novitiate that, in addition to her acts of voluntary sacri-

fice, God would demand of her further suffering. Only a few weeks after her novitiate, she had a severe attack of fever.

The servant who attended on her then was careless and inconsiderate, but all her negligence could only draw from Alphonsa the gentle rebuke, "Whatever you do, do it for the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ; and not just to satisfy your superiors." She never complained to her superiors and when they discovered for themselves the servant's unkindness and reproved her for it, Sister Alphonsa was only too ready to make excuses for her.

She ran a high temperature for many days and grew very weak and tired. Tuberculosis was suspected, and there was talk of removing her from the community. But the sister who had been in charge of her novitiate suggested a novena to Father Elias of Chavara who had appeared to her at the time of her miraculous cure at Changanacherry. She received the suggestion in silence, but later, she told her superior that, if she was not cured within nine days, then she should be removed from the house. She asked the community to pray to the Little Flower for her during those nine days. She herself joined in this novena to the

Little Flower, and with another sick sister, she made a novena to Father Elias. By the evening of the eighth day all these prayers had not brought any sign of relief, and everyone was becoming desperate about her. The fever had now lasted sixty-five days. But her trust in God met its reward. On the morning of the ninth day, the fever left her. Jubilation reigned throughout the house, and High Mass was offered in thanksgiving.

The sister who had suggested the novena, asked her what had happened the preceding night. "Nothing worth mentioning, Mother" was her hesitating reply. But the sister persisted, "Did the Little Flower appear to you?" "I am not worthy to be favoured by a vision of St. Therese. But, since you insist, I will tell you what happened. It seemed to me that a Carmelite nun came, stood close to me, touched me and said, 'You are cured of your fever. You will never suffer from any contagious disease, but you will be tried unto death itself by other sickness.' Whether it was a miracle or not, I cannot say, but I wish you do not mention it to others."

Later, she added that Father Elias had also appeared to her, and taking her by the hand,

had helped her to rise from her bed and walk round the room while the servant lay sleeping. This was in December 1936.

For about eighteen months she was almost free from illness. She returned to community life with her old fervour and unselfishness. Secretarial work, book-keeping and much of the correspondence of the house fell to her, and, when so directed, she helped in the kitchen.

Minor ailments she always had: she had probably even prayed for them because of her desire to identify herself with her suffering Lord. Often she was so tired and weak that she was unequal to the discipline of so strict a life, but she would never give in unless ordered to do so. More often, she would appear to be quite well during the day, but suffered greatly at night, which, as we learn from her own words, was what she prayed for.

"I prayed very much for this privilege. If I had to suffer in the day time, others would come to know of it. They would sympathise with me, and would be put to trouble seeking ways and means of relieving my pain, whereas at night, unknown to others, I could endure the pain alone. The Lord granted my prayer."

This privilege was not granted to her for long. One by one, the afflictions for which she had been prepared in her visions, began to appear. One evening she said that she felt strangely exhausted, but was told it was only her imagination and of no consequence. Accordingly, though far from well, she continued to fulfil her usual duties. But all her determination could not avert the inevitable collapse for long. On the 14th June 1939, the eve of the Feast of the Sacred Heart, the sisters were talking together on the subject of 'Suffering'. "The grains of wheat", Sister Alphonsa was saying, "are ground and crushed. Then the white flour is obtained. This is baked and transformed into the host for the Holy Eucharist. Even so must we be ground and crushed and transformed by suffering like the host. It is when grapes are pressed that we get the juice, the wine; they do not yield wine of themselves. When God, by suffering, purifies us, we become like good wine........"

As she talked she began to tremble violently. Clearly, she was very seriously ill, and the doctor diagnosed double pneumonia. Careful nursing and the prayers of the community

brought her through the crisis, but it was some time before the fever left her.

At about this time, some of the sisters secretly alleged that Sister Alphonsa was assuming a pretence of piety to win the esteem of her superiors. This allegation reached one of the retreat preachers, who questioned her. Sister Alphonsa was so distressed at it, that the fever returned. However, the preacher soon learnt that he had been misled, and asked her forgiveness. Later, when questioned about it, Sister Alphonsa said, "Through a misunderstanding, someone gave him a false idea of me. He felt sorry for me and wanted to direct me in the right way. It was ordained that I should suffer this. I feel no resentment against him. In fact I shall gladly pray for him always."

Again there was talk of the sick nun's removal, but the sister who had been her superior at the novitiate was now Mother General, and when on visitation to Bharananganam, she asked Sister Alphonsa if it would grieve her to be transferred to another place. "Am I not to accept it as God's Will" she answered cheerfully, "and stay where the superiors decide I should stay?"

The Mother General, however, was against a change, especially as the doctors did not suspect tuberculosis, and a new place would have many disadvantages.

Although Sister Alphonsa never voiced impatience or complaint, yet all this uncertainty cost her many tears and distressed her greatly. Thus her crosses were not merely physical; she had her share of mental conflict. Those who renounce all to follow Christ must expect to find themselves misunderstood and maligned, as He was. Community life, in which men and women of diverse temperaments have to submit their wills to the discipline of obedience, poverty and chastity, is not easy at any time, and is described by theologians as a form of martyrdom. 'My greatest penance is community life' a great Cistercian Saint once said. 'Who is there, in fact,' writes Mgr. Laveille in his story of the Little Flower, 'who does not know that diversity of character, difference in education, the play of natural sympathies and natural antipathies, which we can counteract, but which we are unable wholly to suppress, form, for the most fervent religious, innumerable and continuous occasions of suffering?"

But the beauty and glory of this life is, of course, the use God makes of it to transform and refine the human soul to find all its sweetness and peace only in His Will.

Sister Alphonsa was, in all probability, no exception to these aspects of community life.

CHAPTER V

A THIEF FRIGHTENS HER

Whenever Sister Alphonsa was well enough, she urged the sisters to leave her, as she always disliked keeping them from their community duties. One evening after sending her attendant sister to join the others in chapel, she had taken a crucifix in her hands to make her meditation, when she suddenly became aware of heavy breathing, and, looking up, was horrified to see an evil-looking man by her bedside. Terrified, she raised the crucifix and begged him in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ not to harm her. Startled and bewildered, the intruder turned and fled from the house.

Weak as she was, she got out of bed and crawled to the verandah, where some of the sisters happened to see her, and hurrying to her assistance, they found her speechless with fear and shock. As they carried her back to bed she tried in vain to tell them what had happened, and pointed to the visitors' room. She murmured something about a thief, and they thought she was overwrought, until they

discovered in the visitors' room the things that had been left behind by the frightened burglar.

At this shock, coming on top of her exhaustion, her mind seemed almost to break down. She could only recognise those who were constantly with her, and the presence of anyone else made her very nervous. She lost her memory. She could not eat. She found no rest in sleep. She became like a little child.

Her mind having apparently severed all connection with the earth, she spent the time in speaking of the things of God. Occasionally, falling into a kind of coma, she was heard to pray earnestly for favours for others or to be speaking to God directly about herself.

"My Lord of Love, hast Thou not promised a reward to those who renounce everything for Thy sake? Have I not despised my own will in all things? And shouldst Thou not grant me my desires and prayers when I have always sought to do only Thy will? Art Thou not bound by Thy promises to reward those who endure hardships for love of Thee? Therefore shouldst Thou grant me these my prayers. I will not move away from here until they are realised. Do I not reason well? Didst Thou not tell St. Catherine of Sienna, 'If you take

care of my interests always, I shall not fail to take care of yours' Thou knowest that I fully believe this promise and I sought only Thy interests, Thy glory, Thy will. I have never refused Thee anything Thou didst require of me. Why not grant me what I ask of Thee? Was it not for Thy sake that I fasted, pretending not to be hungry? Was it not again for Thy sake that I continued to love those people who had caused me great grief?"

These soliloquies would always include a prayer full of charity:

"Do Thou O Lord forgive those, who, out of ignorance, have tried to harm me."

A favourite prayer of hers was: "Jesus, Sun of Justice, send me Thy rays of light, enlighten my understanding, clarify my thoughts, consume me in the fire of Thy love, and make me one with Thee—one with Thee." And she would clasp the crucifix firmly, and press it to her heart.

During the night, while still unconscious, she would murmur acts of divine love; she would invite Our Lady and the saints to come and help her to prepare worthily to receive Holy Communion; with great devotion she would go through the movements of receiving

Our Lord and make acts of Spiritual Communion again and again; then with head bowed in adoration she would make her thanksgiving. At such times she was completely unconscious of everything around her, yet, at any moment, she might suddenly recognise those standing beside her, and speak to them lovingly of God.

It was during such periods of unconsciousness that she involuntarily revealed the wealth of wisdom, charity, resignation and childlike innocence that was within her. Her mind seemed to return often to the spiritual directions of her novitiate, especially to those which had sustained her in all her later trials. Even those who, before this, had doubted her sanctity, were now convinced of her goodness and drawn closer to her. Visitors to the convent asked for permission to speak with her. One had only to be in her presence to be conscious of her holiness, and even little children instinctively recognised this.

And so, the thief by frightening her had indirectly made her known, and, from then onwards, those about her, in their respect for her, addressed her more often as 'mother' than as 'sister.'

CHAPTER VI

FURTHER TRIALS

No sooner had Sister Alphonsa recovered from the effects of shock, than she developed a very painful swelling, about which she told nobody. Soon, both legs and much of her body were swollen and inflamed, making every movement painful, so that she could scarcely eat, and even breathing was difficult. This condition lasted for many months, and speaking of it she said:

"I am stretched on the Cross now. Our Lord could not move His limbs, or turn to the side while He was on the Cross. He had no bed or pillow. Those who stood by the Cross only mocked Him in His agony. Our Lord had no consolation whatever. As for me, how many are crowding round to sympathise, and to console me by attending to my needs. Our Lord was not served as I am. I am His bride, but how trifling indeed are my sufferings, when compared to the agonies of my Spouse. I would willingly drain to the very dregs the chalice which the Lord has presented to me. No, I am not vanquished yet. Our Lord is

putting me to the test, but I am still ready and willing to suffer far, far more. Is not my Lord with me? Then all is well. Assuredly He has His own designs for me. I must yet suffer much more. All I have been through is not enough. What return O Lord can I make for all Thy mercies to me?"

It is impossible to describe the fervour with which she spoke these words—words that give but a feeble idea of the fire of divine love that burned within her.

The swelling eventually proved to be a large ulcer. The doctors feared that it might be long in healing and that, even then, it might lead to complications. They thought that in about three months a crisis would be reached, and, as the time approached, she had increased pain and sickness. Sister Alphonsa was the only one among them who was unperturbed. Her great sorrow was that she had lost the faculty to read. Even when in extreme pain, that was her one concern. However she prophesied, "In a short time, I will be able to read."

When the Bishop of Changanacherry visited her, he enquired how she spent the nights. After the question had been repeated

three times, she replied: "I love." His Lordship said little after that, but, before leaving, he gave her a short commission—"I entrust all the affairs of my diocese to your prayers."

The Bishop held her in very high esteem, and wrote to her sending her relics and other gifts. A gift she cherished most was the book, 'Lord of Love', which he had sent her.

Towards the end of the three months, her condition became serious and she was thought to be dying. She received Extreme Unction, and a priest kept watch at her bedside so as to be able to give her the Last Blessing. But, she was full of confidence and said that she was not dying, but only struggling to learn to read. Suddenly the end seemed near, and the Last Blessing was given. A few moments later she opened her eyes and affectionately complained about their hastiness "Did I not tell you that you need not administer the Last Blessing to me?"

The crisis passed, and each day brought nearer the 30th September. She had predicted she would be able to read again on this day the anniversary of the death of the Little Flower. On the morning of the Feast, she asked the sister attending her to give her a

book, and after eleven and a half months she was able to read clearly and with understanding. At once, she and her attendant thanked God, and, when the nuns heard of it, there was rejoicing throughout the convent.

Soon she was able to take a little food and at her own desire, she ate with the other nuns. "I am more pleased with the common meal at the community table. It is this food that God especially blesses. I shall be none the worse for taking it."

Not only did she regain miraculously her powers of reading, but she was suddenly gifted with a proficiency in Tamil, a language whose script and mode of expression were foreign to her. Some of the nuns delighted her with spiritual reading from books in this tongue. Then she picked up the books, and, to their amazement, read them herself. They begged her to explain how she did it. She herself did not know, and could only reply, when pressed for an explanation, "I know it, when I look at it as a whole." Priests and other visitors frequently asked her to read out and explain to them books in Tamil.

When her health permitted, a great number of people sought her spiritual advice and

guidance, attracted by her sound sense and understanding. At the same time she was always ready to learn from even the simplest of those who went to her. The very fact that many sought her advice is testimony to her deep humility and spiritual integrity, for ordinary people will not tolerate any assumed airs of superiority.

Her natural and spontaneous affection for others, she gradually transformed into a love of such spiritual perfection that it ennobled her whole being, and singled her out as one chosen by God. People thronged to her, seeking her prayers, which she never refused, but, at the same time, she always warned them, "I shall only obtain crosses in answer to my prayers. You should seek my prayers only if you are prepared to endure them." In a letter to a priest, dated 20th January 1944, she wrote, "I have already told you that, if I pray, the response will be more and more crosses. When crosses cease to appear, you may conclude my prayers are growing less. I believe that love and fortitude increase in direct proportion to the number of the crosses." There is evidence to show that people, to whom she spoke in this way, had to experience very

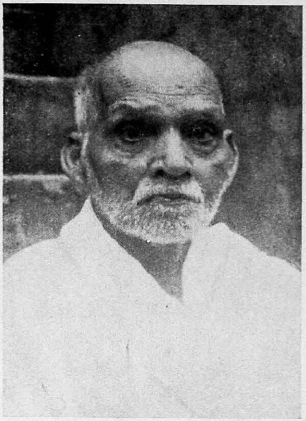
many trials, but they always found they had the grace to shoulder them willingly.

Sister Alphonsa's illness gave her an opportunity to win over those sisters who had misjudged and disliked her. She sought their help and service and tried by every possible means to make them realise her intense longing that they should love one another and be at peace. She was comforted, when some of them realised how mistaken they had been; but others who still showed signs of suspicion or dissatisfaction, caused her great grief. Even so, she continued to try, by word and act, to bring about a reconciliation with them. She bestowed her special kindness and courtesies upon those who liked her least.

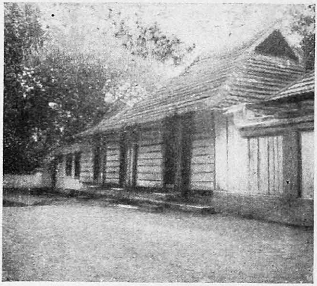
When she was asked how she could carry her charity to such lengths, she said, "Earlier in life it was very difficult for me to love those who occasioned me grief and who accused me falsely. I could not even have looked at them. But, by persistent prayer and practice, it has become quite easy for me. Now I only feel annoyed if I do not love such people. Faithful to Our Lord's command, she was determined to repay evil with love, and offered to God all the merits of her day for a sick nun who

disliked her. Further, on behalf of the same sister, she performed many acts of mortification, and did all in her power to console and cheer her, until moved by such kindness, the sister exclaimed, "How can you devote yourself so much to my service, when in the past I have hurt you so much? I now see that love of God shows itself in the love of one's neighbour, and that your acts of charity spring from this divine love."

Her charity often appeared excessive to those who attended on her during convalescence. She even gave away the things she really needed, and, when told that her charity was beyond the bounds of reason, she would say, "When anything becomes absolutely necessary, God will provide us with it somehow or other. We shall never run short of anything through having given it to others. No, I am sure we shall get much more than we have given. Up till now, surely, it has always been thus; so leave me free in this to do as I will." The truth of this was revealed, when as sometimes happened, they had none of the special food she needed. On such occasions, they always received a gift of it from some unexpected source.

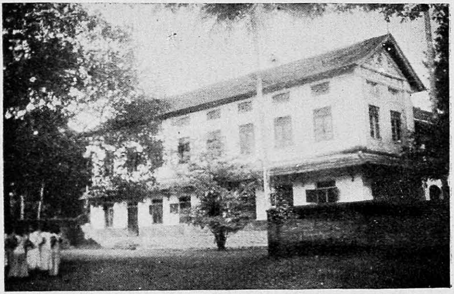


MATHAI PILO OF MURICKAL
The uncle under whose protection Sister Alphonsa was brought up during her early years.



Murickal house.

Muttuchira Church from afar.



The Mother house of the Clarist Congregation at Changanacherry.

CHAPTER VII

IN PAIN

The next three years of Sister Alphonsa's life were comparatively peaceful. By unceasing prayers and repeated dedication of herself to God's will, she had come to endure her trials with such fortitude that she no longer regarded them as suffering. As she measured her love of God by her suffering for Him, she grew concerned. "All others in the convent have their difficulties. But, only for me there is no grief. Thus do I lose the fervour of my love for God, and, consequently, all the graces too." That she had not slept for some years, had eaten practically nothing, and was tortured by the ever-recurring ulcer, all seemed as nothing to her. Driven by an overwhelming desire for suffering that would purify her being and unite her more closely with Christ, she prayed that suffering might dominate her life, knowing that God would never refuse her prayers.

In July 1945, she was given a suffering—a new and terrible suffering, throwing her into fits of violent convulsion. At first these agonies occurred regularly every Friday. The attack

began with pernicious and prolonged vomitings, until her body became chilled. Her eyes lost their power to see, though she could sense who was near. The next stage was one of complete exhaustion and helplessness, so that she could not even move a finger. The struggle and the agony lasted for a period varying from three to seven hours. She was bathed in perspiration, her face grew pallid, and she seemed to struggle with death. Afterwards, she had no recollection of the actual details of her pain, except that it was very intense, but those, who watched by her, often had to walk out of the room unable to bear the sight of it. Once during the earlier attacks, when, despite her assurances to the contrary, a priest was convinced that her agony was the death struggle, the last sacraments were administered.

She was unable to take any food at all though she felt hungry and desired it; even medicine caused vomiting. She was very unhappy that she was allowed the privilege of Holy Communion only once a week. "How can I live without My Lord?" was her complaint. "Should He not be there to give me strength to endure the pains I have to suffer during my agonies? If only I were well enough to

receive Our Lord in Communion!" It was suggested to her that she should pray for that privilege, but, at first, she hesitated, probably because she herself had asked for the sufferings. Finally she did consent to pray that she might receive Holy Communion at least three days a week, and her prayer was answered immediately.

Despite the strain of all her illnesses her appearance changed surprisingly little. She looked somewhat tired, but that was all. Those who visited her, conscious only of the heavenly peace and serene happiness reflected in her face, forgot that she was an invalid and talked without constraint.

In order to save others trouble, she obtained this favour from God that her convulsions might occur at stated times. This prompted her superiors to suggest that she should pray for permanent relief. She answered, "I am ready to suffer not only this, but anything. The modern world has sunk to the lowest depths in the pursuit of pleasure. Let the Lord do with me as He will, trampling over, wounding or piercing me, a humble sacrificial offering, for the sake of a world that is on its way to ruin, and for those priests, religious and nuns

who are growing less fervent in their spiritual life."

It was during this period of her life that she prayed to God to transfer to her illnesses that were obstructing the good work of others. Learning that the Bishop of Changanacherry and also a nun in her own convent had malaria, she immediately thought, "How numerous are the duties to which His Lordship has to attend. Also our Sister here has to attend to the work in the school. I am in any case idling in bed, and in this way has the Lord purposely set me aside to endure all suffering. So I shall pray to my Lord, if it is His will, to let me suffer from fever on their behalf." Very soon both were completely cured, and Sister Alphonsa had malaria added to her other ills. The Bishop of Changanacherry has himself testified that he has since been quite free of the fever.

After she had contracted malaria, she was free from her agonies for a month; then at fortnightly intervals they began to reappear, now with much greater severity. Several times she seemed to be at the point of death, and her attendants found it almost impossible

to endure the sight of her suffering. In desperation, the superior asked Sister Alphonsa to pray for a cure from this frightful malady, or at least for some relief or change. Simply and frankly she replied, "It is indeed true that I am so frightened that I cannot even bear to think of my agonies. I know also that it is difficult for others to watch me suffer. But when I think of the bliss that is mine on the nights following my struggles, I even wish my pains to recur more frequently. I have never before enjoyed such divine happiness and the intensity of my happiness varies with the acuteness of my pains."

She could not answer questions about the nature of this happiness, and could only say, "I am absolutely incapable of describing it in words. I fall into some kind of trance on the nights following the convulsion. I cannot describe the visions I see during the trance. It appears to me that Our Divine Lord comes to me, caresses me and pours out upon me all the affectionate sweetness of His Sacred Heart. The whole room seems to be flooded with the splendour of God. I do not know any more details. The happiness of the moment is unbounded and limitless."

The addition of malaria to her other ills appeared to weaken her resolution, and she grew timid and nervous of her regular convulsive agonies. The night of her soul commenced with this diffidence about her capacity to endure. She sought relief and consolation from those whom she trusted and respected; and God was generous in bestowing on her, often from unexpected sources, the encouragement and consolation she needed. Once, when she longed for a relic of the Little Flower, to her surprise she received one by post. It had been sent to her on the very day on which she had first entertained the wish. It was with such consolations that God encouraged her.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GIFT OF FOREKNOWLEDGE

Several instances lead us to believe that Sister Alphonsa was gifted with foreknowledge.

On, July 21st 1943, at 11 p.m., Sister Alphonsa called on the sisters who were sleeping in her room to pray for the soul of a Father Poondikulam who had been ill with consumption. She had heard, she said, the church bells announcing his death. The sisters, knowing that church bells are not tolled at night, gave little credence to this, but, when the next morning they heard the bells, they realised that Sister Alphonsa had been right. They later ascertained that she had roused them at the exact time of his death.

Some months later, Mother Ursula asked Sister Alphonsa to pray for Sister Seraphina who was ill with fever. She assured Reverend Mother that there was no need to worry, for the fever would leave Sister Seraphina on a certain day. Everyone was disappointed when on the morning of that day Sister Seraphina's condition was unchanged; but Sister Alphonsa remained confident that her prayer would be

heard. Sister Gabriel testifies that in her prayers she openly demanded of God the favour she asked for, in language that revealed her supreme confidence. At 5 o'clock on the same day Sister Seraphina was cured.

One day when Sister Alphonsa saw that her Superior was worried because she had not the money for their needs, she assured her, "Tomorrow by the time you want the money, you will get it from somewhere. Have no fear; trust fully in Divine Providence. I shall see to it, please don't worry." On this, as on several occasions, her fervent prayers came to their aid in providing for their needs.

The father of one of the sisters in the convent was dangerously ill. His death at that particular time, would have meant great hardship for his family, so the whole community was praying for his recovery. When, several days later, there was still no improvement in his condition, Mother Superior said to Sister Alphonsa, "Are you not praying for the recovery of Sister's father? He is no better. Pray fervently" Reluctantly she gave her answer, "Dear Mother, I am praying very hard for him. But what can we do? He is going to die of this" All too soon, this prophecy was verified.

In June 1946, Sister Seraphina's mother lay dying at home, about two and a half miles from the convent. The nuns were daily expecting to hear of her death, when on the 4th June news came that she seemed much improved. However, at midnight of that day, Sister Alphonsa woke her companions and told them that the patient had passed away. Yielding to her insistence, one of her companions got up and said the Rosary with her for the departed soul. Next morning they learned that death had occurred at midnight.

When asked how the knowledge of future events came to her she said, "I pray very very fervently, imploringly, and then the answer just suggests itself to me."

Many of the sisters in the house state that very often Sister Alphonsa knew their secret thoughts and troubles and consoled them. On one occasion one of the sisters wished for a remembrance of Sister Alphonsa, but did not ask for it. Some days later, Sister Alphonsa called her and gave her a prayer written in her own hand. On another occasion a newly professed sister lost her medal of the Guardian Angel. She tried unsuccessfully to obtain another, but she did not ask Sister Alphonsa,

because she had to get special permission to speak to her. One day, unprompted by anyone, sister Alphonsa gave the sister a medal of the Guardian Angel, which she had put aside for her, saying, "For some days I have kept a medal of the Angel for you. Why did you not come to me for it?"

Another time, it was almost a challenge the sisters gave Sister Alphonsa. Could she, by prayer, obtain help for a young soldier, who had come home on short leave? He had come to the convent to see his sister who was a religious in their house. At that time she had gone out to a distant hospital and was not expected back till evening. He had to return before 4 o'clock. One of the sisters then said to Sister Alphonsa, "Pray and see if you can bring that sister back before 4 o'clock." "I shall pray and get her back" was the bold reply. The sister returned in time to see her brother. Then Sister Alphonsa told her, "I was telling Our Lord to get you here." The sister, overjoyed, acknowledged that at exactly the time Sister Alphonsa had started to pray, she had felt a strange urge to return—an urge so strong that she had taken advantage of special permission to travel accompanied only by a servant—and had hurried back.

CHAPTER IX

HER PERSONALITY

As Sister Alphonsa's reluctance to face the camera was only overcome as an act of obedience when she agreed to be photographed in group, the photograph now in circulation is not a very good likeness. It fails to show the grace and charm of her countenance, the brightness of her glance, and the ever cheerful smile which characterised her to the end of her life in spite of several years of intense suffering. Her sufferings left surprisingly little trace in her appearance, and had no effect at all on her natural gaiety of disposition.

In ordinary conversation she was witty and humorous but never unkind, nor would she permit any uncharitable talk in her presence. She was persuasive and skilful in argument, and extraordinarily gifted in presenting spiritual truths to others.

Her naturalness and simplicity impressed all who met her and endeared her to them.

She was singularly graceful and dignified in her movements, especially when going to Holy Communion. When it was suggested to

her that, on account of her weakness, she should be helped to and from the altar rails, she protested that such assistance would distract and trouble her. At community prayers her concentration was so intense that she appeared to be in another world, and in all matters her behaviour was exemplary. She practised in her own life the virtues she recommended to others, particularly those of ready and cheerful obedience to spiritual directors and superiors, and a willingness to fulfil the wishes of equals and subordinates whenever possible.

She loved, and was loved by, little children, who sought her out and paid her special attention. They longed to play with her, and often pulled impulsively at her habit to draw her into their games. One six year old visitor to the convent said she had come to see Sister Alphonsa, and, when taken to her, told her, "I have longed to see you ever since I heard that you had received Extreme Unction. I couldn't come till now. Our Lord is keeping you lovingly. He will come and take you away to heaven." Those who stood by playfully asked the little girl, "Is it because Sister Alphonsa is fair that Our Lord will take her

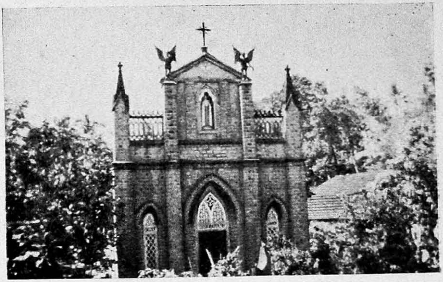
to heaven?" "No, no," the child quickly answered, "Don't you see how she is always fasting?" and, turning to Sister Alphonsa, added, "You won't have to suffer as much as Our Lord had to. It is three years since I lost my father. When you reach heaven, you must tell me whether he is there. Our Lord Himself will come and take you." Whenever this child came to the convent, she insisted on seeing Sister Alphonsa. Another four year old girl, recognising Sister Alphonsa in a group of nuns, went up to her and begged her to go home with her, promising her sweets and dainties as an inducement.

Sister Alphonsa delighted to be with the novices, and they, whenever possible, sought her presence. However ill she was, she always spoke to them lovingly of charity, sacrifice and obedience. She was specially endowed with the gift of reading the hearts of those who sought her guidance and consolation. Many novices found their troubles and worries dispelled by her words, even before they had revealed them to her. Some have recalled how helpfully she read their hearts. To one she said, "You have grown somewhat cold in your dealings with God. You must approach Our

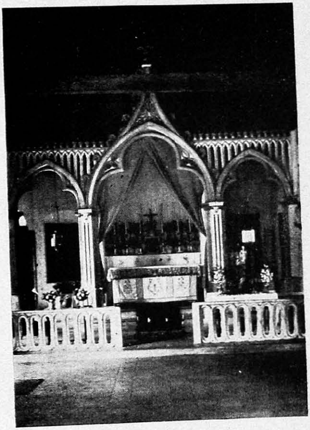
Lord more closely in the Blessed Sacrament. Go to Him as to a father and tell Him all your needs." At Christmas time, a novice from a neighbouring convent came with some of the older sisters on a visit. Sister Alphonsa, who had never seen her before, with immediate insight, realised her weakness. She gave her a small wooden cross, which she herself had received as a gift only the day before, and gently reproved her, "We must all bear our crosses. There is no way out of it. We must get used to trivial ones, so that we may have strength enough for the heavier ones." She added, with a more personal touch, "You find it difficult to suffer, don't you? You recoil at once like a sensitive plant. No, it does not become us. We cannot live in the world, let alone the convent, without having to suffer." She summed up her corrective guidance with the advice. "Let us pray to the Infant Jesus. He will most surely give us the necessary strength."

In herself, she combined with her great spiritual wisdom a childlike happy nature. Ordinary things delighted her and she smiled with joy at the sight of beauty in flower or fruit or other object, and her immediate impulse was always to share her happiness

with others. She had also something of the child's gravity and directness which caused her to take the words of others very seriously, sometimes much too seriously. Her colleagues teased her about her credulity, and she fell an easy victim to their jokes. At the same time, they acknowledged her spiritual stature and her power of rendering them great spiritual assistance. They sought her help eagerly in their needs, and some tried to describe this gift of hers for rousing and encouraging religious fervour by saying that a few minutes spent with Sister Alphonsa were as effective as a good retreat. In time, even her envious detractors recognised the great grace that adorned her soul, and many people were conscious of it even at a first meeting.



The Convent Chapel at Bharananganam.



The main altar in the Chapel.

A group of the reverend sisters of the Clarist Convent, Bharananganam. The popular photo of Sister Alphonsa has been copied from this and enlarged. She is seen here tenth from the left in the third row from top.

CHAPTER X

HER CHARITY

Sister Alphonsa's work for others was not confined to giving them spiritual encouragement. Whenever her health permitted, she was eager to give practical help. Throughout her life her consideration for the feelings and comfort of others was as marked as her indifference to her own. One day in 1930, when she was a student of the Higher Class at Vazhapally, she had to prepare a spiritual bouquet and an address for presentation. The day before the ceremony, while she was away at a meal, one of her companions accidentally knocked over the oil lamp and ruined her work. When she returned, her one concern was to console her worried colleague, and, by making light of the incident, to set her mind at rest. Then she sat up all night to prepare new copies for the next day. In the novitiate, she lent her veil to another novice though it meant her preparing a clean one for herself. Kindnesses such as this were characteristic of her, and she always denied that they caused her any hardship.

She showed extraordinary zeal for relieving the pain of others and attending the sick. Often during her sleepless nights, she groped her way to others who were ill, gave them their medicine, and did what she could to cheer them and to ease their pain. She valued greatly any service rendered to herself, and always feared that she was being cared for better than others. When she herself was the victim of lack of attention she seemed unaware of it, but she immediately grew concerned if she saw others neglected in any way. She accepted only those services that were necessary, and, whenever possible, sent her attendants away to rest. She was equally considerate when dealing with servants, careful always to spare them the slightest embarrassment or humiliation. She gratefully accepted their services however unsatisfactory, and gave no sign of it when she found them unpleasant.

Silently and prayerfully she kept in touch with all in the house. The overworked sister, the restless novice, the nun sorrowing over some family misfortune, were often taken by surprise and given new courage when they learned that, unknown to them, Sister Alphonsa

had already realised their troubles and difficulties and had been praying for them.

In spite of her own intense suffering she never became indifferent to the sight of the slightest suffering in others, and pleaded for special comforts and privileges for them. She urged them so persuasively to take care of themselves that they had to heed. They rejoiced at having in their midst one who always sought to make others happy while she denied herself in all things.

In community life there are ample opportunities for practising one of the most difficult exercises of charity, that of bearing with patience the thoughtlessness, lack of consideration and impatience of others. The servant would prepare her bath, but by the time Sister Alphonsa managed to reach the bathroom, someone had forestalled her, and there was no water left. Several times a day this might happen, and yet she found in it no cause for complaint. She tried moreover to pacify the indignant servant. "Never mind," she would say, "Say nothing about it. Such things are part of community life and they happen only that I may become more virtuous. Let them have their baths first. Have they not all got

heavy responsibilities, while I am idle?" Nevertheless the servant frequently complained after such incidents, "I am tired of her charity." Others were not always patient with Sister Alphonsa and openly showed resentment and anger when they thought that she had been the cause of inconvenience to them. She not only kept the knowledge of such outbursts from her superiors, but if they did happen to hear of them, she pleaded for and excused the offender. "Dear Mother, do not make any enquiries. Let Sister say what she likes. Should we not always have something to suffer? Is not that community life?" To those who had spoken unkindly to her, she herself showed a marked friendliness. She accepted without resentment ill-natured or hurtful remarks, showing only less constraint and more affection towards those who made them. "How sweet it is to let ourselves be judged ill or well" was her attitude. When one who had often been harsh with her was ill, Sister Alphonsa not only prayed for her recovery, but visited and consoled her so lovingly that the sick nun expressed surprise at such unmerited kindness. Sister Alphonsa reassured her, "Dear sister, you only behaved as you did because of some excitement or mis-

understanding. I have no grievance whatever against you and have forgotten it all long ago." This sister was so overcome by such great charity that one night she got out of bed and went to Sister Alphonsa and repeatedly apologised. The latter, overjoyed at her change of heart, and forgetful of her own weak condition led her back.

Sister Alphonsa offered acts of atonement for the failures and shortcomings of others, and used every means to make them realise their faults and make amends. But she never judged harshly or rashly; and reproved those who did, warning them against a too hasty condemnation of others and pointing out that lack of charity even in speech can be gravely sinful. Dwelling on the pain that such talk can cause the tender-hearted, she concluded, "So we should be more careful in the use of our words than the miser in the use of his money."

A tiresome task in this land of tropical insects is the upkeep of the beds periodically. Someone had to go over them ridding them of vermins. Sister Alphonsa delighted in doing this unpleasant but very necessary work. Having obtained permission, she frequently

carried out this task while the community was at evening meal. The collecting of discarded candle ends for this and other charitable purposes was quite a hobby with her.

Today it is not mere candle ends that her burning charity has set alight, but innumerable candles that burn around her tomb.

CHAPTER XI

HER SPIRIT OF SACRIFICE

Talking to one of the sisters on the first day of the Novena to the Sacred Heart in 1946, Sister Alphonsa said, "We must make reparation by sacrifice and suffering. We must endure all things, that oppose our will and offer them to Our Lord." Very early in her religious life Sister Alphonsa resolved not to speak or act in any way yielding to her natural impulses and to offer some act of reparation every time she failed in this resolve. All through her life she kept this resolution before her mind.

When people asked her about her illness and sufferings she used to reply, "Jesus gives them to me. It is in giving crosses that Jesus shows His love. He sends crosses only to those He loves. Pray to Jesus to give me strength to suffer everything. Does not Saint Therese tell us that we should strew flowers of suffering at the feet of Our Lord?"

She frequently dwelt upon the fact that poverty and contumely were the riches of her Spouse and that they were therefore all her

wealth and were to be accepted with joy. "When the king marries a little shepherd girl and she as queen is entitled to share the king's possessions, does she complain or sorrow over it? Does she not accept them with pleasure? Would she not consider it a grave misfortune if she were denied her share of the king's riches? But we are averse to accepting the possessions of Our Divine Spouse. We even go so far as to complain of our share. Does that become a bride? Should we not rather be happy over it?"

She herself certainly accepted unreservedly the assets of her Spouse. In one of her greatest agonies, she was heard praying, "C Lord, give me more to suffer silently. I would drink deep of the chalice Thou hast given me—drain it to the very dregs." She even regretted the efforts of others to relieve her pain. Often she murmured to herself, "No, these services do not become me. They do not become the true bride of my beloved. I should drink of the chalice He sends, all of it, without spilling a single drop. What consolation did He receive, hanging by three nails on the Cross? Insult and reproach for consolation! Bitter drink for His thirst! The Cross for his head to rest on! As for me, I am resting on soft pillows!

Eagerly the sisters try to console and relieve me by kind words and loving services. What claim have I to such kindness? Oh, my soul thank the Lord for His mercy."

At other times she grew anxious, "will not the Lord be displeased with my feeling that the pain is intense despite all the comforts and attention bestowed on me."

Sometimes, in the height of her agony, she would say, "The Lord is testing me. No, I am not tired. I can suffer still more. I have still not subjected myself to the will of God. It is because I do not yield that I am visited with crosses. Ah, learn to yield, let me learn to yield, let me learn to yield!"

One day one of her superiors tried to avert an occasion of suffering for Sister Alphonsa. When she knew of it, she pleaded with her, "It is God's will that I should suffer it. It is enough that you pray for me to have strength sufficient to bear it cheerfully." When the superior persisted, she was told, "Mother, you should not do it. Do we not read in Holy Scripture how the mother of the Machabees encouraged and sent her children to their death? You should do the same thing, mother, prepare me to suffer."

Only three weeks before her death, she was urging the Mother General of the Congregation, "Pass on to me your sufferings. Am I not, in any case, a child of suffering? It is a source of joy and peace to me."

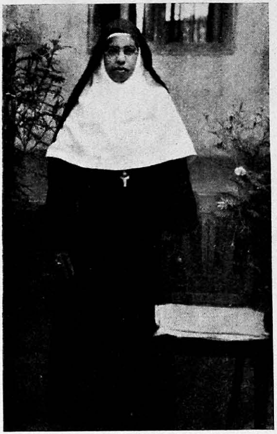
Constantly, she referred to our apparent nothingness, and pointed out the value God has set upon it. "The leaves that lie at the root of the plants rot away, thus providing the food which makes the flowers grow. All see the flowers and rejoice, but no one thinks of the decaying leaves that fed them. For us, it is enough that we remain as those leaves for ever."

She always encouraged others to suffer cheerfully. After joking about her own ailments to one who was also in poor health, she said. "Sister, we should all suffer, suffer for Jesus; suffer for our Order—for the spiritual progress of our Order." She told some of the novices, when they went to her after their retreat on the eve of their perpetual vows, "On the day of her solemn profession, Saint Margaret Mary went up to the crucifix in the courtyard. The rose tree that entwined the figure was full of flowers. Our Lord asked her, 'Embrace and kiss it.' She did so. 'Repeat it

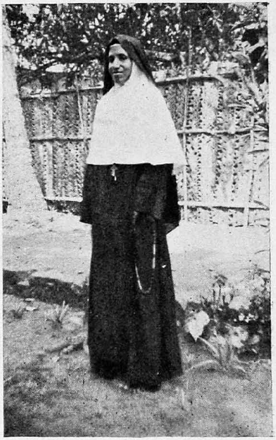
every day,' Our Lord continued, 'Now it is laden with flowers but in time they will fall—only the thorns will remain. They will pierce you through. Even then you must embrace and kiss it as you do now.' You have only commenced your religious life. Now it is not very difficult for you, but, as days go by, you will have more crosses. Love and embrace them then as well."

Her prayers constantly expressed her love of sacrifice and suffering for the glory of God.

"Oh, my Jesus, hide me in the wound of Thy Sacred Heart. Rid me of the desire to be loved and honoured. Deliver me from the mean pursuit of honour and fame. Humiliate me until I am almost nothing—until I become a spark in the fire of the love burning in Thy Divine Heart. Give me the grace to free my mind of all creatures including myself. My Jesus, sweet beyond all description, transform all my worldly consolations into bitterness. Jesus, Sun of Justice! By thy divine rays clarify my thoughts, illumine my mind, purify my heart, consume me in the fire of Thy love, and thus make me one with Thee."



Rev. Mother **URSULA.**
She was largely responsible for the training of Sister Alphonsa as a novice and later as a religious.



Rev. Sr. **GABRIEL.**
The trusted companion and colleague of Sister Alphonsa for many years. She enjoyed her most intimate confidences.

The Clarist Convent, Bharananganam.

The St. Mary's Forane Church,
Bharananganam.

CHAPTER XII

SPECIAL DEVOTIONS

We have already seen something of Sister Alphonsa's personal love for Jesus. This showed itself most especially in her devotion to His Sacred Heart and to the Holy Eucharist.

A note in her handwriting, discovered after her death, reads, "I will spend all the time I can manage to find before the Blessed Sacrament. My only desire is to love Our Lord fully. I prefer to die rather than hurt God by any wilful venial sin even." Her life bears witness to how she carried out her resolution. In her spiritual diary, she recorded innumerable visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and acts of Spiritual Communion every day. If unable to go to the chapel, she made spiritual visits. Her subconscious actions during her delirium all told the story of her deep-rooted love for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. A superior has observed that Sister Alphonsa seemed to become one with Jesus during her meditations before the Blessed Sacrament. When people spoke to her sympathetically of her physical and mental agonies and sufferings, she used to reply, "However

much the pain may be, when I offer it up as a flower to the wound in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, it becomes a great consolation." "When I suffer insults or humiliation, I will seek shelter in the shadow of the Sacred Heart, and give thanks to God."—thus runs another note of hers.

She spent her sleepless nights making frequent acts of love. "It is good" she used to say, "that I lie awake through the night; I can fill it with acts of love to the Sacred Heart. When asked about her favourite prayer to the Sacred Heart, she replied, "It is the wound in the Sacred Heart that consoles me. I say, 'My Lord Jesus, hide me in the wound in Thy Sacred Heart' and when I reach so far, I fall to repeating the same over again."

She also liked to discourse on the love of the Sacred Heart, and loved to hear and to utter the Holy Name of Jesus. The month of June, dedicated to the devotion to the Sacred Heart, was a month of special joy to her. While she was able, she herself saw to the decoration of the altar and of the statue of the Sacred Heart during this month. She constantly exhorted her colleagues to advance by means of this devotion to the Sacred Heart.

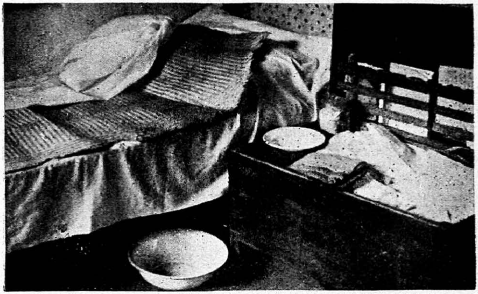
Devotion to Our Blessed Lady follows naturally upon the love of Jesus. At her clothing ceremony in the religious life, she had taken the name of 'Sister Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception,' and she had made her offer of self-surrender to Our Lord through the mediation of His Blessed Mother. From very early days she made Saturday a regular communion day. The May devotions were another of her early expressions of piety, and she has described how she used to decorate the picture of the Blessed Virgin daily with flowers. Her devotion to Our Lady grew with her experience in the religious life. She was given special privileges even as a religious for her private devotions of love to Mary. Always encouraging others in this devotion, she would explain to them how they could crown the Queen of Heaven with their little acts of kindness, mortification and love. Even when they visited her on her sick bed, she enquired of them how far they had progressed in collecting gifts of sacrifice and virtue for their dear Mother. "What did you offer to our Blessed Mother today? How many sacrifices? How often have you given up your own will? How many gems have you added to the crown of our Mother"? Often she repeated to herself,

especially before Holy Communion, "Holy Mary my mother, make my heart a garden, pleasing in the sacred eyes of your Divine Son." She taught this ejaculation to the little children who visited her. She tried to recite the Rosary daily, and after she had recovered from the effects of her fright, she made it a habit to recite all the fifteen decades every day. Our Lady of Dolours was her example and model in suffering. She always had her picture by her side and when her pain was extreme, she turned confidently towards it and drew from the sight of it, inspiration and strength to suffer everything for God's sake. She decorated the picture with flowers when she was able to do so, or saw that it was decorated by others when she was ill. Even in her last agonies she turned to the picture and invoked Our Lady, "Mother, O my Mother!"

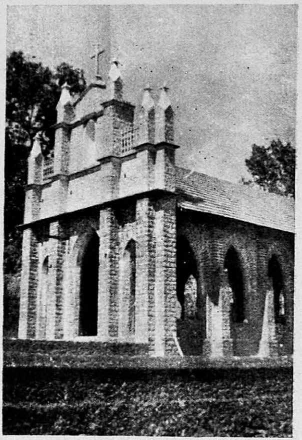
Saint Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus, was also in her devotions. Even from early days she was keen on receiving Holy Communion on the seven Wednesdays preceding his feast day. It is a pious custom in Malabar for well-to-do families to give food and gifts to three poor people on the feast day of St. Joseph. Sister Alphonsa herself used to minister to these poor

people when she was at home. She really saw in them the Holy Family. She was zealous about continuing the same practice in the convent. She prepared food for these people when she was well enough, and was satisfied with serving it to them when she was ill. Her charity towards beggars was not confined to feast days. She hated to send them away empty-handed on any day.

This photograph of Sister Alphonsa in the coffin is said to be the best in portraying her true likeness.



These were about all that Sister Alphonsa could have called her own. They are all carefully preserved in her bedroom.



The Mortuary Chapel.

The Tomb.

CHAPTER XIII

DEATH

Sister Alphonsa, faced with the renewed violence of her agonies realised that her end was drawing near. She remarked, "Birds which are light in body can fly very fast. When some birds fly, you can't hear even a sound from their wings. So will I fly away. When my sacrifice is complete my Divine Lord will call me. Then will I make a quick dart; I will speed to the bosom of my Lord. None of you will know. My death will follow one of my agonies, and, as my agonies are always like death-struggles, no one will take any notice of it."

She seemed to talk as if she were master of her death and could delay it at will. She inquired of the sisters, "Have I not suffered enough? May I not die now?" But they begged her to remain with them, and she consented. One day her Superior asked her, "Would you be happy to die now? Do you desire to die?" The reply was characteristic of her. "I sometimes wish to die so that I may not be a burden to others, but when I think of the out-

rages Our Lord suffers from His own people, I wish to suffer not only this but even more, and until the consummation of the world. I consider those days to be wasted when I have not suffered at all. Surely the consolation we feel after our suffering is the only true consolation, though, at the time, suffering is always difficult."

When this final phase of her agonies had persisted for over a year, she felt it was time for her to join her Lord. She was concerned at the serious inconvenience and suffering she was causing others. She experienced a feeling of spiritual desolation which caused her to write to her special spiritual director, Father Romulus, summoning him to her. On his arrival, she sought permission to pray for her death. This disturbed him at first and he refused. But finally he allowed her to pray for it, with the proviso "if it be the will of God." He was not to know then, that her will was but little different from God's, and that in about three weeks' time she was to die.

In a letter to the Mother General, dated July 16th, she said, "Even as the kite snatches off the chicken, so will the Lord snatch me away." During these last days she told Sister

Teresa of the convent that her time had come, and that it was better for her to die.

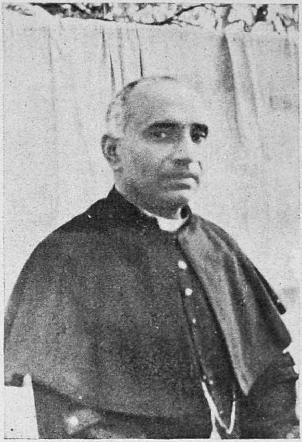
Nearly a week before her death, when her former novice mistress, Sister Ursula, now superior at Kozhuvanal, came to Bharananganam, Sister Alphonsa asked her if she might pray for death to come to her during her next agony. Sister Ursula agreed, though reluctantly, saying, "Yes, pray as you like. Is not death within your own grasp, sister? Our Lord is only awaiting your assent to call you away." Soon afterwards, Sister Alphonsa sent a note to Father Alexander Gnavallil who was treating her during this last phase of her suffering, telling him, "My agonies will be coming on very soon, and this time I expect to meet my Judge."

A few days before her death, Sister Alphonsa had a dream which she described vividly, "I reached some place having travelled long, crossing mountains and hills and streams and rivers. I had to cross yet one more place. It looked very difficult. I had to get through a small hole. I peeped in and saw at a distance Our Lord seated in all His brilliance. He was watching me. I felt timid and kept looking down. I peeped again. Many were there;

they had all passed the road I was on. Our Lord called out to me, 'Why are you afraid? Come here.' At this the dream melted away."

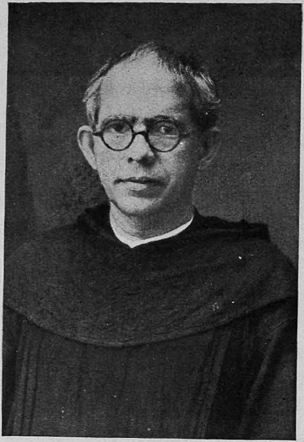
On the 27th July, 1946, the chaplain of the convent, Father Kuruvilla Plathottam, visited her. She was sitting up in bed reciting the Rosary. She told him, "There is going to be a battle tomorrow. I am getting ready for it." It was the first time she had used the word 'battle' to him, but she always asked for his prayers on the day before her agonies; so he saw nothing unusual in it, and smilingly remarked, "How many times have you not been through this battle! Polish up the old weapons, and keep them ready by your side." She said, "That is just what I am doing. Father, you must pray for me; I shall pray for you."

On Sunday, July 28th, Sister Alphonsa went to hear Mass. She took her usual seat by the door, but her agonies commenced, and she had to return to bed. Sometimes, on the eve of her agonies, she had said to others, "Perhaps I may be dying tomorrow." But this time she said nothing. She seemed anxious not to let others know of her departure from their midst.



Very Rev. Fr. KURUVILLA PLATHOTTAM,
Parish Priest, St. Mary's Church,
Bharananganam.

As chaplain of the Clarist Convent, he knew Sister Alphonsa intimately. He administered the last sacrament to her.



Rev. Fr. ALOYSIUS, T.O.C.D.

The beloved spiritual director of Sister Alphonsa. He guided her from the days of her novitiate. The much-treasured letters of the revered Sister published herein were all addressed to him.

The agony started in the usual way. As she entered into it, she requested others to pray that she might have enough strength to bear it. By eight o'clock that morning her agonies grew more intense. This time there was clearly something unusual about her. On other occasions when her agonies were at their height, she kept her eyes closed and scarcely spoke. But that day, at about 10 o'clock, she opened her eyes and smiled on those who stood by, but many of them, unable to bear the sight of so much suffering, went out of the room. Now, even the sufferer found the agony too severe. "I can't stand the pain. Pray for me. You renew my intention of offering the pain to God while I struggle with it." She pulled the blanket over her face to cover it up as tears rolled down over her cheeks. She murmured, "It is what Our Lord has given me to suffer—let me suffer—let me suffer..." At the height of the pain she cried out, "Mother, my Mother, Oh, my Mother!" Her face became radiant and resplendent at that moment. The Mother Superior, who stood by her side, held out the crucifix for her to kiss. "Dear little one, be in peace—have patience." Smiling she replied, "Mother, I am in perfect peace." A few minutes later she seemed to get ready to go

somewhere. She called on those watching by her bed, "Get me my dress. Let me go." They told her that she was already dressed. She insisted, "Give me a good habit and a good toque, and let me go." Those who stood by, now asked her whether they should send for the priest. Her reply was indistinct.

The thought of death had not occurred to any one till then. Having seen the unusual developments, they sent for the priest and the doctor. Before they arrived, Sister Alphonsa had another flash of consciousness, in which she called on "Jesus, Mary and Joseph," and sank back. When the priest and doctor arrived her pulse was failing, and, at the suggestion of the doctor, the Last Sacraments were administered. A few moments later, shortly after noon, the soul of Sister Alphonsa returned to her Maker.

The superiors waited for some time to make sure that she had not merely fallen into a trance, before they announced her death by tolling the bell.

It is difficult to concede that Sister Alphonsa had no previous intimation of her death. She had foretold that her death would be unexpected and that she would fly away

unknown to all. She always wished to suffer secretly, and, even in dying, she perhaps tried to save others the pain of watching her die. To suffer and die secretly, that seems to have been her lifelong desire.

CHAPTER XIV

RECOGNITION

The community realised that they had lost their greatest treasure, and grieving for themselves, they gathered round respectfully and lovingly to kiss the body, which had so recently housed a soul of such great sanctity. The funeral was held next morning, the coffin being carried in procession to the parish church by the sisters from the convent. At the Requiem Mass her special spiritual director preached the panegyric. Then her body was laid to rest in the cemetry close by.

Sister Alphonsa was unknown to the public, and, apart from the children who attended the convent school, her father and a few close relatives, scarcely anyone from outside attended her funeral. No newspaper made any mention of her death. But the ways of God are mysterious. He has been pleased to acknowledge and honour one who followed Him in spirit on the Way of the Cross. Otherwise, Sister Alphonsa would never have entered the hearts of thousands of people—people of all castes and creeds, Christian and non-

Christian—nor would her grave have drawn innumerable pilgrims from afar. Many favours are already attributed to her intercession. The columns of several dailies and periodicals abound in records of thanksgiving to her. Let us thank God, who has thus chosen to glorify one whose humble life and death and burial passed unnoticed. Her ideals are now revealed to the world to check the onrush of materialism and the ceaseless quest after pleasure.

Sister Alphonsa loved children, and it was through little children that God, at first, let her be known. The little ones at school began to say, "Sister Alphonsa is a saint." They prayed at her grave and attributed to her intercession small favours which they obtained in answer to their prayers. The more imaginative among them dreamt of her. Gradually, this devotion of the children spread among their elders, and now, some of them also claimed that they had obtained favours through Sister Alphonsa's intercession. Thus started the great popular manifestation of fervour around her tomb.

The ideals of Sister Alphonsa were truly those of the founders of her Order, Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Clare. Like them,

she eagerly embraced suffering and the Cross with the same longing as the world shows in its pursuit of physical pleasures. Let those then, who suffer adversity, find their inspiration in the life of this poor Clare sister, and, instead of grieving over their misfortunes, let them face them cheerfully, reaping the great harvest to be gathered in them.

Human understanding may never fully grasp the problem of suffering, but the Christian can at least grasp its priceless worth. Without suffering, as Cardinal Newman says, the world has achieved nothing, but through it, nothing is impossible. Great empires and the strongest armies go down before luxury and ease, but sacrifice and suffering develop and refine the spirit of man unto the strength of tempered steel. But to the Christian it is more than that; it is the sacrifice of oneself to God, the oblation of Calvary and the sharing with Christ in the atonement for sin. The Christian soul in its agony enjoys the privilege of Simon of Cyrene.

"In the Cross is salvation; in the Cross is life; in the Cross is protection from enemies. In the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the Cross is strength of mind; in the Cross

is joy of spirit. In the Cross is height of virtue; in the Cross is perfection of sanctity. There is no health of soul nor hope of eternal life but in the Cross. And there is no other way to life and to true interior peace but the way of the Holy Cross and of daily mortification. Go where thou wilt; seek what thou wilt, thou shalt not find a higher way above, nor a safer way below than the way of the Holy Cross."

"The Cross is always ready and everywhere awaiteth thee. If thou carry the Cross willingly, it will carry thee....if thou carry it unwillingly, thou makest it a burden to thee, and loadest thyself the more, and nevertheless thou must bear it....and how dost thou seek another way than this royal way, which is the way of the Holy Cross? The whole life of Christ was a cross and a martyrdom; and dost thou seek for thyself rest and joy?"

(Imitation of Christ: Book II Chapter 12)

LETTERS

PREAMBLE

In April 1946, a few months before Sister Alphonsa's death, Mother Ursula made some attempts to obtain from her some account of her spiritual experiences. She says,

"I suspected that God was revealing Himself in her in an extraordinary way, and I suggested that she should dictate her experiences, as she was laid up at the time and too weak to write them down herself. Protesting she said, 'Mother, you need not keep any written notes. There is nothing in me worth recording. Even those notes which I have made at various times, you must destroy.' She insisted that I should take them and destroy them in her presence. I refused to tear them up, and she began to weep, saying, 'Mother, soon you will be transferred to another convent. Here am I sick and laid up. If others come and handle the contents of my box, they will see and read them. Nobody need know of me. What more am I but a worm? There is no cause for me to be remembered after my death. There is but little virtue in me. Think of me as a speck of dust floating in the air. What is

there in me worth recording?' I still hesitated and she went on, 'Dear Mother, why are you so solicitous? What is there impossible to God? If there is any virtue in me—or if God wills that I should be known to others—it will happen anyway. You need not worry or trouble yourself about it. Do we not read in books how God revealed Mary of Egypt to the world, in spite of her solitary life in the forest? At the time she was disregarded. Why then should you be worried now, Mother?' In the end I was so moved by her pleading that I went for the notes and destroyed them immediately. This at last satisfied her."

So we have now merely what others remember and a few stray letters.

x x x x

When souls first enter on the way of perfection God in His goodness usually draws them on by granting them much consolation and spiritual sweetness, but as they advance, He withdraws this favour, leaving the souls bereft of all feeling and in a state of complete dryness or spiritual aridity. This He does to test the soul's faith and perseverance and also to impress upon it its own nothingness and inability to advance one step without His divine aid.

Souls have been driven to the verge of despair from this realisation of their nothingness in face of the power and perfection of God. With stark realism Saint John of the Cross describes the soul's experience in this state calling it "The Dark Night of the Soul." The autobiography of the Little Flower also contains a vivid account of her spiritual night, during which she was beset with doubts against the Faith—and she came against "a wall which reached to the very heavens shutting out the starry sky." Christ Himself, in His agony on the Cross, would seem to have experienced this same desolation when He exclaimed, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

Sister Alphonsa too was called upon to pass through the same ordeal. For nearly a year, ecstasies followed upon all her agonies, so that her life was one of wonderful happiness. Her pains indeed hardly fell short of the agony of the soul passing from the body in death, but her ecstasies were such that she would seek no relief from her pain if it were at the cost of these divine favours. But now the pains grew so intense that she was unable to call on God or even to think of Him or find any consolation or strength in Him; for one

whose only desire and ambition day and night was to be in loving converse with her Spouse, this caused her the greatest grief.

It was during this period that most of the letters to her spiritual director, Father Aloysius, asking for his guidance and advice, were written. The following *extracts* from those letters give a rare insight into her soul

Bharananganam,

30—11—1943.

I am now certain that God does not intend me to enjoy any of the joys of this world; nor do I desire them. I do not lose my peace of mind when faced with grief and suffering. However, my nervous system is at present upset and the stress of any grief makes me unsteady. A little guidance and direction will restore my balance and give me strength to endure any suffering. If it were not for this nervous affliction, I suppose I might have been too proud, but now, when I come to myself after these attacks, I realise my littleness and rejoice at it.

Now, I wonder whether this rejoicing might lose for me some of the merits of suffering. I think I ought to rejoice in these sufferings since I am sustained in everything by Divine Providence. "Sweetest Jesus," I keep saying, "turn all the world's joys into bitterness for me." If, after that, bitterness comes, I have no cause for grief. I remember the advice you once gave us—when a rich man chooses even the poorest of women to be his wife, she henceforth must share with him joys

and sorrows alike. Since only grief and suffering have fallen to the lot of my Spouse, I too lovingly embrace them, and my soul is at peace, though my body continues to be tormented. For the last seven years I have ceased to be my own, being given over entirely to my Divine Spouse. You know all that; and now let the Lord do as He will with me. It is not a cure I am anxious for, but only that His Holy Will be fulfilled in me.

Nevertheless, I do feel that I shall improve somewhat physically and that I shall even go about again a little and bear further crosses. All of which would please me. My one complaint is that my sacrifice seems to be consumed rather too slowly.

I have hoped and prayed that others should never know my likes and dislikes, but my present malady makes this impossible. So my desires are not realised in anything. If I were relieved of my nervous disorder and had only other troubles to endure, perhaps no one else would have known of my difficulties. Also if I prayed for this, I feel I would be answered. I do not know what I ought to do.

Poor Reverend Mother! She is beset with endless worries and cares from all sides and I

am an additional cross to her. I often long to speak to her and offer her a word of consolation, but I resist the temptation, for I fear that I might thereby overindulge my natural affection and so displease Our Lord. You know how I love her, but if my love for her should lead me from God, I am ready to renounce it this very day. As all this may just be an expression of my self-love, I want your opinion in the matter.

There is one other thing I wish to tell you. *My good God has never denied me anything I have asked of Him*—this makes me happy beyond measure. Now I wish to know something specially, may I ask you? It is this—to know whether Our Lord is displeased that my nature is so disposed to these affections. I have nothing more to say. I had a nervous attack this morning and the reaction has led to my speaking out so freely from my heart. Please excuse me.

SISTER ALPHONSA.

Bharananganam,
20—11—1944.

Only my Lord Jesus knows the variety and the extent of my sufferings, and these in circumstances when others can discern no cause for any grief. However, dear Father, as my good Lord Jesus loves me so very much, I sincerely desire to remain on this sick bed and suffer not only this, but anything else besides, even to the end of the world. I feel now that God has intended my life to be an oblation, a sacrifice of suffering, for otherwise I should have died long before this. He accepts my offering rather too slowly; it gladdens me to think of it, and you, Father, must join me in thanking God. Thank Him for me. There was always some relief in my illness, but, for the last week or two, I am not well at all; may be because I have lost all peace of mind recently. I am in pain day and night and it is with considerable difficulty that every minute is endured. But I am consoled to think that it is a just God who assesses the merit of all these things.

SISTER ALPHONSA.

Bharananganam,
14—3—1945.

I am in a sorry plight, and who knows what will become of me? Our Lord now deals with me quite mercilessly. I even give way to the feeling that He has closed His eyes on me. I am trying my best and there is no response. Never since the days of my novitiate have I experienced such desolation. Perhaps Our Lord has withdrawn Himself from me because of some wrong word or action of mine. God shows no sign of being pleased with my good works or my sufferings however extensive, and, on my part, I feel as if I have no love for Him in my heart. He must have punished me for my failure to live up to the graces He has bestowed on me. I am at a loss what to do. I have surrendered my whole self to the Lord; Let Him do with me what He wills. I have examined my conscience and cannot find any wilful offence. I joined the convent renouncing all for the sake of my Lord. Now, I am only concerned with what is going to become of me. I had but little sleep before; with these worrying thoughts the condition is beyond description. Now I have lost all desire to take any food and do not feel at all well physically. My

one wish is that death should not come to me before I have regained spiritual peace. Ever since this mental worry came on me, I have not done my own will in anything. I suffer and endure very much. Still Our Lord is not quite pleased with me.

SISTER ALPHONSA.

Bharananganam,
10—5—1945.

Help me to become the most beloved bride of Our Lord. I openly acknowledge my own helplessness. You told me that I should never cling to anything that would not please Our Lord; I always remember your advice and pray that I may follow it. I am confident too that He, my Good God, will forgive me the shortcomings arising out of my weakness. I pray to be cured of my diseases, if it is God's will, nor do I feel uneasy now in praying so. I have much less patience and endurance now than I used to have. During the novitiate nobody ever knew my likes and dislikes.

Yesterday I had a letter from Muttuchira. One part of it disturbed me, and it is still on

my mind—it was this: "We can but rejoice when we think what you were like as a child. My humble desire and request is that you should continue the same, now that you are a religious......God has blessed you with an innocent heart, be very careful not to tarnish it". Did I not tell you the other day how I have changed since becoming a nun! May the good God forgive me my shortcomings!

SISTER ALPHONSA.

Bharananganam,
February, 1946.

I have given myself up completely to Jesus. Let him please Himself in his dealings with me. My only desire in this world is to suffer for love of God and to rejoice in doing it. For a long time now, my suffering has been both physical and mental, and I have sometimes felt it was beyond my endurance. I have even shed tears over it. I wish very much to endure everything without the least indication of discomfort or complaint, and, so far, my grief has not been noticed by anyone. Won't He who sends these crosses also provide the strength to bear them ?

Dear Father, there are some who imagine that I do not suffer any mental agonies, and that my superiors and companions treat me with special affection because I am always cheerful with them. I think this is because I have so completely sacrificed myself that others can never understand my likes and dislikes. Others who are sick imagine that nothing troubles me because I do not complain. At times I have been tempted to think whether I also should not complain occasionally. So far I have not yielded.

When I met you, I strongly desired to explain all my difficulties to you, but again I kept silent, realising that God would continue to grant me strength to endure everything without any human consolation, even as He had done before. It was also in my mind how grieved you would be to hear of my trials and difficulties. But I now find it difficult to bear them all, especially as I had not opened my heart to you. Believe me, it was not want of confidence that restrained me from revealing them to you. I am like a worm wriggling in the midst of a burning flame. Even despair came over me. But I soon repented, sought forgiveness and regained my peace of mind.

My good God is watching over all my difficulties and consoling me. He has recently granted me to suffer things more trying than anything I have yet known. However, I am not disturbed and, at that, I rejoice and give thanks. Once, when I was in great stress of mind, I opened a book at random and read, 'My heart is grieved by the world indulging in pleasures and committing countless sins. Where shall I find consolation? Is there any heart that loves you as I do? And yet is there another heart so little loved in return? I have come to rest in the hearts of my chosen ones. Let them, by the fervour and fidelity of their service, heal the wounds which sin cuts into My Heart. I need souls who will console the ceaseless grief of My Heart'.

I can hardly describe the emotions those words aroused in my heart. I solemnly promised to endure gladly all sorrows and hardships so as to end the grief of my Lord.

Beloved Father, I shall endeavour to guard myself against all venial sin even. Still, there are many shortcomings standing in the way of my love for God. Hitherto, physical pains have predominated. Now, mental sufferings are equally severe. Distractions, dissatisfac-

tion and even lack of charity abound in my heart. When I overcome these patiently I feel an indescribable sweetness. I should receive some consolation here if I recounted all my trials to the world, but what would be the gain? No, all recounting shall be reserved until I stand in the presence of the Lord.

I am willing to suffer even more for the sake of my Spouse, but am losing much virtue on account of my failing strength. However, I am not denied the consolation of knowing that God is watching me carefully all the while; that I am left to suffer all these even while the Lord is enthroned in my heart. I seem to feel that my superiors and colleagues are often in the wrong in their words and deeds. I never wilfully entertain such distracting thoughts. They may all be trials sent by God to humiliate me. Beloved Father, please pray earnestly for me and send me your advice and words of consolation.

For some days past I even suspect some mental derangement, but I am struggling under protection of Divine Providence. Whatever comes to my mind, I am noting down, hoping it may give me some relief. I have written these lines, dear father, with the great-

est difficulty. I request you kindly to read through this completely. You may find the ideas a little disorderly as my mind is not fully clear. Now, more than ever, am I in need of consolation.

SISTER ALPHONSA.

Bharananganam,
May, 1946.

I have been mortifying myself desirous of facing everything and enduring it without any consolation. Our Lord seems to be watching over me like one purifying silver. For some days past my body and mind have both been suffering intensely, almost burning. The skin has peeled off my body from below the neck right down to my knees; but there is no festering anywhere. My face and forearm continue the same as before. I am being attended by doctors, but strength and consolation come only from the Lord. It does not much matter if my body is to suffer still more. I only pray that my peace of mind be not destroyed; it has not been destroyed so far. But, gradually God might even deprive me of that. I have been spared my agonies for nearly a month now,

which is a great blessing from God. I have had malaria since Wednesday in Holy Week but the fever now comes on alternate days only. In His wisdom God sends everything only after having measured and weighed it. How could I have borne it if the agonies had come on at the same time as the fever was raging.

I hope you will pray specially that I may have the grace not to waste any occasion of merit. I do not think that anybody has any ill-feeling towards me; God has ordained that certain people should influence my life towards greater perfection. I fully believe that it is the hand of God that is at work in me.

A letter arrived from the superior of the Kozhuvanal Convent the other day, just when I was thinking about my own state. She had written to say that a certain portion of it should be read out to me. It was this, "We have to be refashioned after the pattern of Christ and presented to God with the craftsman's perfect finish." This was a timely advice. I shed tears, meditating on the ways of Providence.

I do not know how to explain to you the exact condition of my heart. God will surely

forgive its shortcomings, won't He? *Father, make me a saint. I am doing all in my power,* but my weaknesses are many. Sometimes I find it exceedingly difficult to put up with most trifling things. Though I try to hide my likes and dislikes and endure everything, it has not always been possible for me to do so. *God in His goodness has enabled me to preserve inviolate the grace I obtained in Baptism.*

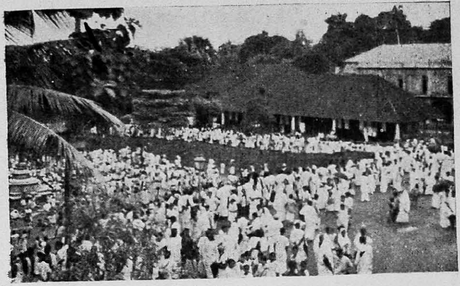
It grieves me to feel that others in my condition would have loved God very much more, but what gives me more courage is my belief that God will continue to sustain me ... I wish and pray that I may be cured of any inordinate love which might hinder my love of God in any way.

One day last week, I had a strange feeling of difficulty, heaviness and fatigue which lasted for half an hour. Disappointed that I was not dying, I felt aggrieved and prayed importunately to Our Lord to cure me of such a condition. After some time I grew calm and happy and I went to bed imploring of God forgiveness of my fault. That night my joy was beyond all description. As you yourself told me the same Lord who gives the bitterest medicine, also gives the sweetest sugar......

Somehow Sister Gabriel used to guess correctly my mental agonies, but this time she had no idea whatever. That was a gain for me.

SISTER ALPHONSA.

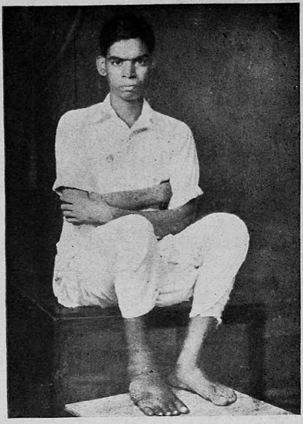
SELECTED REPORTS OF FAVOURS



Pilgrims to Sister Alphonsa's tomb.

Thomas of Ponkunnam—a living witness to miraculous intervention. He got cured of his club-foot.

SOME OTHER RECIPIENTS OF MIRACULOUS CURES.



Augusthy Kochappu,
Vadasseril, Palluruthy,
Cochin.

Khadil Misa,
(child)
of
Changanacherry.

I have visited S. H. M. P. School, Ponkunnam today and met Thomas Abraham Attuyalil, student of IV class B, He showed evidence of recent talpse of both feet. Evidence of his prolonged walking on the side of his feet are seen (as thickened skin) on both feet. According to the report of the manager, Rev. Fr. George Mulangattil and the class teacher Mr. K. J. Mathew, the boy had the deformed feet and the awkward gait till 29th Jan. 1947. According to the boy his feet became normal when he woke up on the morning of 30th January.

He has had no treatment for this condition but paid a visit to Sr. Alphonsa's grave at Bharananganam. Now the body rests on the soles of his heel, flat at the ground when he walks, and there is no pain. I consider this a perfect miracle and invite the opinion of the medical profession.

(Sd.)

K. E. EAPEN, B.A., M.B., B.S.

Kanjirapally 12—2—47.

CATHOLIC MISSION BARAMURI,
Nunni P. O., Mymensingh Dist.
East Pakistan,
11th May 1948.

On 16—4—48 a young pagan was brought here in a very precarious condition. The doctor who was attending him backed out at the last moment, obviously because he found the case hopeless and hence dangerous for him to carry on any further. On examination it was found that the patient had contracted typhus fever and had reached the last stage. Although we found no hope of curing him, we admitted him just to satisfy his distressed wife and parents. We put him in the quarters, (a small, little thatched house without even a bedstead. This is all we have at present.) He was completely delirious and hence nursing was a hard job. After two or three days we lost all hopes; we were convinced that unless God worked a miracle he would die at any moment. Sr. Alphonsa's name occurred to our mind in our longing to see the man cured. We put the picture of her near his pillow and asked his relatives to pray to her as we ourselves did.

The fifth evening at 9 p.m. we examined the patient and found him in agony. Pulse

was hardly perceptible and breathing was almost stopped. His eyes sunken but half open face pale like a corpse, we felt no doubt that he would die that night. So we sent word to his relatives to come with a bullock-cart to remove the corpse as soon as possible; we wanted to check the spread of the lice. They arrived by midnight but as the patient remained the same. we told them to wait until he expired. We gave him an injection to relieve the agony. The whole night we kept watch and prayed to Sr. Alphonsa but the patient was only getting worse at every moment. In the morning we went to Mass after warning the people not to move him before we returned.

All through the Mass we prayed earnestly to Sr. Alphonsa to work a miracle and thus make our Lord known among the teeming millions of pagans here. After Mass we hastened to the quarters and what we saw we could not believe. We were stunned to see the young man sitting on his bed and cleaning his teeth. On our entrance he spoke in clear voice in English, "Good morning! Mother. Where do you stay? I feel pretty hungry. Would you give me some rice and chicken-curry?" For some time we remained stupefied and speech-

less and then we went to call the fathers to see the miracle.

The young man returned home after a few days. Recently he paid us a visit but none of us could recognise him before he introduced himself.

(Sd.) Sr. Marie Emmanuel.

St. Martha's Hospital
Bangalore 2.
1—3—48.

Dear & Rev. Father,

You will be surprised to hear from me. It is to let you know, dear father, that Sister Alphonsa "wonderful little saint" had cured our Sister Mary-Andrew after a novena made to her.

Our dear Sister Mary Andrew had a crippled leg for the last 10 years, she was not able to walk without a stick, could not bend the knee and today, she is able to walk without a stick, make the genuflexion without support etc. When your reverence will come to St. Martha's you will have the happiness to see her and know more details about her disease..

Sr. M. de St. Hubert R. G. S.

49911

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The book is brief but well done. Giving the main outlines of her life, it puts into focus her mission in life, a very interesting and well written sketch . . . .

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Mrs. Browning once said of a page of De Quincey's that her eyes did not read it but her heart trembled through every line. If that is the test of excellence, this biography will stand it. Mr. Chacko may take credit for making the events and thoughts recorded as moving and impressive as they are to those who know her in her own tongue.

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★

For comments by the exalted prelates of the Catholic Church see page 27 inside.

For copies of the book apply to the Publishers or to The Rev. Mother Superior, Clarist Convent, Bharananganam, Travancore, S. India Price, Rs. 2-8, Postage extra.

ALPHONSA'S FAVOURITE PRAYER

"OH, my Jesus, hide me in the wound of Thy Sacred Heart. Rid me of the desire to be loved and honoured. Deliver me from the mean pursuit of honour and fame. Humiliate me until I am almost nothing—until I become a spark in the fire of the love burning in Thy Divine Heart. Give me the grace to free my mind of all creatures including myself. My Jesus, sweet beyond all description, transform all my worldly consolations into bitterness. Jesus, Sun of Justice, by Thy Divine rays clarify my thoughts, illumine my mind, purify my heart, consume me in the fire of Thy Love and make me one with Thee".

Amen.

ALPHONSA PUBLISHERS

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